

My daughter, Danielle and I, make it a daily habit to read a Rumi poem and share our take on it with each other. It's a chance to connect over a little bit of wisdom from the Sufi poet and somehow, the day always seems to be brighter. Sometimes Rumi can be pretty arcane. A reading the other day included his metaphorical reference to "the slaughterhouse of love." And, we are encouraged to not run away from this dying because as far as Rumi is concerned, "Whoever is not killed for love is dead meat."

I couldn't make heads or tails out of it, so I used my faithful search engine also known as ChatGBT to see what Rumi was talking about. Imagine my delightful surprise when I was told that Sufi mystics were all about something called "fana," the process of letting go of the ego and self-will through the slaughterhouse of love. "Love demands surrender, and surrender feels like dying to the self. It's not that love literally kills people but it slays the false self so that the deeper self (the soul) can live. Though the image is severe, it is ultimately merciful. In Sufism, the death of the self is not an end but a doorway to discovering union with Divine Mystery.

In today's reading we have mention of two parables, the parable of the Good Shepherd and the parable of the lost coin. If you continue reading the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, you will also read about the third parable of loss, the parable of the Prodigal Son. We know that parables were the primary way Jesus taught (Matthew 13:34) We also know that the disciples of Jesus were often perplexed by the parables, even after he had explained them. (Mark 4:10, 13)

Amy Jill Levine points out in her book, Short Stories by Jesus, that parables were a teaching convention used by the prophets to challenge their audience to look deep inside themselves and recognize where they had lost their way. She thinks that better titles would be The Shepherd Who Lost His Sheep, The Woman Who Lost Her Coin, and The Father Who Lost both of his Sons. For Levine, parables are not intended to teach a single universal moral. She writes, "[They are] designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, and disturb." In fact, if religion is supposed to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, if we hear a parable and think, "'I really like that,' or worse, fail to

take any challenge, we are not listening well enough.” As far as Levine is concerned, “If we hear the parable and are not disturbed, there is something seriously wrong with our moral compass.” So, if you’re like me, you probably weren’t that disturbed by the first two parables because you’ve been taught to think that Jesus was just trying to trip up the religious leaders in the crowd. Or, like me, you think you already know what these stories are all about the lengths to which God will go to rescue all of us from our sinful ways.

But, according to Levine, the folks who heard these stories for the first time, heard something different. And, she hastens to add that reframing the parables is not intended to erase the focus on repenting and forgiving. As she puts it, **“Rather, we seek to add a new understanding based on what we imagine Jesus’s original audiences would have heard.”** That audience would not think that the man who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coin, and the father who lost his sons were symbols of God simply because God doesn’t lose us or abandon us even though it feels like that sometimes. Nor would they think of the sheep and the coin as examples of repenting, because sheep and coins don’t repent.

**Instead, we need to recognize that the first two stories set up the third. The main message is about counting, searching for what is missing, and celebrating becoming whole again.**

Dr. Levine’s book, *Short Stories By Jesus*, is 344 pages long. But, the parables she explains in that book are only 1902 words long and the three we’re talking about today are only 698. Jesus was a man of few words but omg, those words continue to startle us to this day.

I’ve got to give Dr. Levine props, because as it turns out, she is not only an erudite scholar with a massive vocabulary, she is also someone who can cut to the chase. She wrote a book for children about these 3 parables that asks the question, “Who Counts?” and the answer is everyone. Regardless of race, creed, color, sexual orientation, gender identity, rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, we are all God’s children.

And she recommends that when we read parables, we should ask ourselves: “Where am I in this story? How am I like the man who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coin, the father who feels he may have lost both of his sons? Do I ever feel like the lost one? How am I like the younger brother who does not want to stay home? How am I like the older brother who does everything his father tells him but who does not feel that he is loved?

The parables then prompt other questions: Have I lost something, or someone, and not paid attention? Is there someone I take for granted? What or whom have I forgotten to count? And when old hurts are healed and forgiveness is offered and received, do I celebrate the healing? That’s what we do my siblings in Christ, we have been called to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

As Paul writes, All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18-20)

So, are you disturbed by today’s parables? What’s your answer to the question, “Who Counts?” Does Charlie Kirk’s assassination matter? And if it doesn’t, are we willing to pick up the mantle of being ambassadors for Christ and pray for his soul and his grieving family? Presidential biographer John Meacham asks the question this way:

“Does a reprehensible crime against a political figure lead to more reprehensible acts, or does it remind us that we have to be able to live with people whose opinions we despise without resorting to violence? If this is open season on everybody who expresses an opinion, then the American covenant is broken.”

**Amen**