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...Now we come to today's gospel.

Jesus loves to tell parables to make his theological points to those most theological of thinkers—the grumbling Pharisees, the judgmental ones who in this passage are looking askance at Jesus for hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. My guess is that the Pharisees probably regarded the tax collectors and sinners with a wrathful eye.

Why did Jesus use parables to make his theological points?



Kenneth Bailey, a scholar who focuses on the time and culture in which Jesus lived in order to understand the theology of Jesus, says this about parables.

“A parable is a house in which a reader/listener is invited to take up residence—to look on the world through the windows of that residence.”

And so Jesus invites the Pharisees, and us, into the wilderness world of a shepherd and his sheep, and into the home of a poor woman whose most valuable possessions are ten silver coins, so that we can see through different windows, and get a different perspective on the nature of God.

And although we don't hear this passage read today, these two parables are followed by the famous parable of the prodigal son.

Jesus hopes that the Pharisees, by hearing these parables and entering into these worlds, may find a broader and wider understanding of God than the exclusive, judgmental understanding that they currently hold.

So first, let's enter into the wilderness world of the shepherd.

The shepherd, considered a rather rough and unsavory character in Jewish society at the time, is in the wilderness with his flock of one hundred sheep. One of them gets lost.

And so the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes off to look for the one missing sheep.

The Pharisees would not have been surprised that the shepherd would have gone to look for the missing sheep. After all, God pursues the Israelites who have chosen to wander away—this is the story of our salvation history.

But what is surprising is that God's wrath does not figure at all in this parable that Jesus tells. Nothing is said about the shepherd's anger at this lost sheep for having left the flock.

Jesus says only this, that when the shepherd finds the sheep, *he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.*

The shepherd doesn't hook the sheep around the neck with his staff, and drag it back to the others in angry, wrathful state. Instead, *the shepherd lays the sheep on his shoulders and rejoices.*

This image radiates love and compassion—and love, unlike wrath, *is* an attribute of God.

Now in the gospel according to John, Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.”

God is the one, when we're lost, and no one else knows or even cares that we're lost—God is the one who sets aside everything else in the cosmos and comes to find us—searches for us until we're found.

The psalmist David knew this about God—“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the furthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

In the second of these parables, we enter into the house of the woman whose most valuable possessions are her ten silver coins, perhaps her dowry, and one of the coins is missing.

All of us know how frustrating it is to lose something, and how the loss eats away at us until we find what we've lost. And so the woman sets about her search.

She lights a lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds that missing coin. Not only is she persistent, but she is methodical.

*And the woman lights a lamp—*

Jesus said, (again in the gospel according to John), “I am the light of the world.”

When we enter into the darkest places in our lives, God comes searching for us. It's as if we're lost deep in a cave somewhere, in absolute darkness, helpless, and then we glimpse the smallest flicker of light coming toward us, and that light gets brighter and brighter, and finally we're rescued and safe, bathed in the light of Christ.

No wonder that on Easter morning, we light the Paschal fire and sing, “The light of Christ, thanks be to God.” This light of Christ is the light by which we're found, the light of our salvation.

At the end of these two parables, and also at the end of the story of the prodigal son, big parties take place.

The shepherd calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

The woman calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

And the father of the prodigal son says to the wrathful older brother who is furious over the party for his sinful younger brother, “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Celebration and rejoicing, banquets, feasting—God not only invites us into this utter joy, but will also come in the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to seek us out when we get lost on the way to the party.

The grumbling Pharisees knew and understood God’s use of wrath.

But Jesus wanted them to know the very nature of God—love.

Jonathan Edwards ended his famous sermon with these words.

“Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of the Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let everyone fly out of Sodom: “Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed.”

But Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. When you are lost, I will come and find you, and lay you on my shoulders, and rejoice and bring you home.”

Amen.

#### References

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