

Who counts?

Luke 15:1-32

Rev J Shannon

We've been told what the parables mean. Honestly, we have been taught by Sunday school teachers and preachers who were taught the same stories and the same interpretations that our father and mothers were taught before them. You can go all the way back to the middle-ages and read texts of what the stories mean and little has changed. Then the meanings were enshrined in art (like the painting behind me) and stain glass windows in churches and cathedrals all over the world. Remember – these images were for an audience who could not read.

Problem is, Biblical scholarship did not stop when we stopped putting stain glass in churches. Unlike most churches, the Uniting Church has in its Basis of Union, a commitment to scholarship and adaptation as we learn more about Jesus' life, times and teaching...as we learn more through textual analysis, research, historical finds and translations. We change as we learn – otherwise we would still be teaching flat earth theories.

I want to gently pry open some of old views about this parable. We were raised believing that the Father who runs out to greet the errant son is God and that the purpose of the parable is to remind us that God loves us no matter what: that God forgives us no matter what. None of that is a bad thing or a bad interpretation but I have been doing some reading and discussion – and listening to Amy Jill Levine. Maybe I can crack open some new possibilities for you.

The first clue is that it is too simple. Jesus' teachings were always meant to be provocative. They were meant to turn the tables and disrupt the norm. Simple interpretations are *our* choice because it's comfortable. But Jesus didn't want to make people comfortable. He was challenging all the old ways of thinking: God was *not* in the box in Jerusalem, the Divine was everywhere. The rich *did not* get an automatic ticket to the new kingdom. The religious were not necessarily blessed if they only went through the motions but did not put it into action. The kingdom was open to *everyone*, gentiles, sinners, tax collectors, women, foreigners and even enemies. Jesus was pointing out when the priests, who we once believed to be our side, were in fact exploiting people and how the whole elitist temple set-up *did not* serve God. Jesus

believed all people were seen and counted. He took God's word, 'I knew you by name'...seriously.

Jesuws was a Jewish teacher so in a Jewish tradition asked a question, you tell a story. Here is what the parable means to me -

Way back in 1974, psycho-drama was part of my teacher training. We were following the teachings of a wonderful British educator, Dorothy Heathcote. She was teaching in a boy's school and would start the first drama class of the new intake by asking, 'if you were shipwrecked, what kind of character would you look for in your leaders?' It was a great way of getting very young boys to start to articulate what good leadership looked like and how that is actioned. In other words, it built a mental picture early on that perhaps shaped their own development.

In the BBC documentary, *Three Looms Waiting*, she took a whole class of 8-9 years-olds on a journey across the sea to settle in a new country. In this dramatic imaginary exercise, they articulated all the good things they would build into the settlement and governance of this new land. She travelled with them – as a leader and observer. Her role as an older person was to ask questions and sometime reflect back what she was seeing. At one point, she set the boys the task of dividing up the land into properties (of course, suggesting they work out the fairest way) and she excused herself to rest. She left them alone for quite a while and when she returned, they proudly told her how they had divided the land. 'Where's mine?' she asked...and of course, as she was out of sight, they had forgotten her. It was a sobering moment for the boys to realise what they had done. How easily we exclude those we do not see. And she asked, is this how you treat your elders?

Today's parable/story begins with "there was a man who had two sons". Count with me - ONE- TWO. "There was a man who had two sons"... Now ask yourself, would God throw a party and not invite the other one? Would he not notice one son was missing? Amy Jill Levine says the father had time to gather the robes, find the ring, kill a calf, call the caterers but not call the son from the field?? The older brother hears the music and he has to call a servant to ask what's going on. God does not lose things or people and yet we interpret this parable totally different from the 2 before it. This is a story about counting: one, two. (repeat ONE- TWO!)

There are other factors about the story that we need to consider.

My brilliant colleague, Daniel Mossfield, suggested we look at it through the lens of rural economics. First of all, the estate actually belongs to the older son as soon as he is born. The property is freehold (that is he can do with it as he chooses) after the death of the father. The farm is not the father's to give away. That is the law of inheritance. So right away we are talking about an event that is not the norm. It's not what people would expect. Now let's do the maths. You've got 30% increase of mouths to feed with 50% less assets.

Let's say you have a farm of 100 acres and 50 sheep and one son wants his inheritance now. That means you sell 50 acres and 25 sheep and you and your father have to make a living from the remaining holding...you have to feed yourself, father and whatever wives or servants live with you. ¹There are economies of scale and critical mass at play here. For example, if you have 100 sheep and one or two die, it's recoverable. But if you only have 50 sheep and you lose one or two – that's critical. Is it possible to survive on ½?

The son spends his money and returns. Now you have to support 3 men + wives and servants on ½ a holding. You don't get the other ½ back. This is an economic offense, an offence against legal custom as well as a moral one.

Why have we never noticed this before?

And the last thing I ask you to notice, is there is no resolution. It ends there with the father saying, see, this other one has come home. What was lost is found. How will they live from now on? Has peace been made? No. Sad to say, but the ending makes the father seem naive or stupid.

Amy Jill Levine says the parable is about **who** counts. Have the visible and invisible been counted? This is a powerful statement. Remember Aboriginal people were *not* counted until 1967. Whom have we not counted and whom have we overlooked? Whom have we made to feel as if their voice doesn't count? The parable calls us to make sure we do the counting. Is this story about the prodigal son or the invisible other?

And yet, there is one more angle. What if we do the counting and don't like what we find? The little brother could be all the people we do not want to think of as our brothers (and sisters). Our churches are full of comfortable places for people who are just like us but what of the others? Who will **we** accept walking with us on this Christian path?

¹ Do the maths – you have 30% fewer mouths to feed but have lost 50% of your income.

Later in the scripture, it is clear that the pharisees thought this parable was about them and they took great offense. But to hear this story with their ears meant that it was probably the economic implications of the tithing and paying for temple sacrifices and collections that offended them. They would have seen the economic implications as having a go at their lifestyle.

I believe that though they may have taken offence, they missed the point. In other words, they took offense at the wrong thing. Jesus was pointing out just how exclusive and hierarchal, they, and the Jewish traditions, were. The pharisees were not comfortable with all these gentiles and foreigners joining the parade. The little brothers that had been dirty and lived with pigs were *not* acceptable companions. Jesus is asking them to accept what they cannot. There were very strict purity laws in place. Remember, even *eating* with a gentile or entering their house was not OK.

The parable has 3 points. My call today is to look around to who is missing. Who counts? It is our responsibility to do the counting, not God's – and it is up to us to acknowledge the silent voices. Then we must acknowledge that we have many more brothers and sisters on this journey than we realise – even if they are not like me. Finally, we are sometimes guilty of making decisions while some are out of the room. That is what our first nations brothers and sisters have accused us of in the past and it's true. So now count with me. "there was a man who had two sons" One – **Two!**

So Lord, as I continue my Lenten journey I **AM** listening. I'm listening to the silent ones and I am busy counting those not in the room. And I am asking myself – who are my brothers and sisters? Give me the grace to welcome them.