

Frustrating Grace

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Luke 15:1-10

I thought it was supposed to end at 7. It's now 7:08, and there's no end in sight. It is a sweltering hot evening in late summer/early fall at Ligon Middle School, where my son has soccer practice. And I am swimming through the humidity at 7:08, now 7:09 pm, while his coach – that punk – has just made another round of substitutions in the scrimmage. Does he not know? Is he that oblivious? All of us parents and stepparents are waiting on the sideline like tigers ready to pounce. I have a third-grader to get home, for what will be a late bedtime, plus a little sibling who gave up 20 minutes ago on the activity I brought for her to do while her big brother practices, and she will be up way, way, way past her bedtime. Why am I dripping sweat like I'm a part of the team, and why is our practice field so far from our house, and at what point do I say something to the coach, because I'm not that parent, except I am that parent? And now it's 7:12, and they haven't even done that sprint-the-whole-field thing they always do last. This is going to mess up the delicate balance of Wednesday night. We don't have time for this. I don't have time for this. And how dare that coach stop to give an individual pointer right now.

We live in a culture that rewards busyness and equates it with success. Our advanced technology and increased communication have allowed us to do more and more over the years. As a society, we have welcomed these changes, taking gigantic bites from of the buffet of possibilities that are offered to us – whether it is sports, theater, music and more available to those of us in school, or travel meetings, Zoom calls and side-hustles available to those of us who work, or one more church or civic commitment available to those of us who volunteer. We wear our busyness as a badge of honor. We recognize our exhaustion as a sign of growth, as if the human race were a competition instead of collective noun. And amidst all this, there are moments, moments like the one I had a few weeks ago on a field in southeast Raleigh, moments when it all comes to head and we can't herd all the cats or juggle all of the balls or return all the e-mails or do all the things. We can barely hold it together, and it seems like soccer practice will go on forever ...or at least until we dissolve.

Just then, we overhear Jesus – that punk – telling a story. It's one of those parables he made up, so it isn't true, except that it is true, because Jesus' truth is not always limited by the facts, much like my son's soccer coach is not always limited by the space-time continuum. Anyway, Jesus tells these well-worn stories about sheep and coins, searching and finding, joy and more joy. And this time around, I can't help but think, "Who has time for that?" Who has time to go after the one sheep, the one that wandered away – so maybe it didn't want to be here in the first place – the one sheep that is lost and alone? Who has time to leave the other 99 without a good babysitter and money for pizza? Who has time to sweep the whole house until she finds the coin? Not just for five or ten minutes, mind you, **but until she finds the coin**, no matter how long it takes. They make robotic vacuum cleaners, now, just for this kind of thing. The shepherd, the woman, our God, is being so very free with time that it seems frivolous, ridiculous, decadent, especially to those who are starving for it. Of course, God has existed

before time, and created time itself out of nothing, so it makes sense that God shouldn't be bound by a clock.

But it's hard to hear that now, for normal mortals like us who have side hustles and AP homework and a meeting at 7 pm tomorrow night. It's hard to hear that while us normal people are muttering and bragging, grumbling and showing off about our exhaustion and busyness. This time around, we're already standing with the Pharisees and scribes, for all of us both yearn for and yet despise what Jesus is saying about time. Sometimes, it takes some convincing for me to consider myself even capable of being on Team Pharisee. But for these parables, I made everyone matching t-shirts. Perhaps you'd like one. Jesus is being so extravagant, so counter-cultural, so not-of-this-world in the ways he describes time in these two parables. Both of them have no expiration date on God's searching for the lost, and nothing in our world works like that anymore. It makes us mad, and jealous, and mad that we're jealous. But, you know, Jesus is just telling a story or two.

That's the thing about Jesus. He often starts so simply, so gently, that we don't even know what we're getting into. But parables are a strange world to inhabit, and the more we climb into them, the more they expand like a Harry Potter magic trick. For our Lord, Jesus Christ, isn't just being generous with God's time. Jesus is being generous with a lot of things. Take the images he chooses for God. He starts with God as a shepherd – a good shepherd we might say, like the one who shows up in Psalm 23. A shepherd is a rich and multilayered image here. Shepherds had to possess strength to protect a flock from predators and vigilance to keep that protection going around the clock. A shepherd had to be gentle, with little lambs and runaways. And of course the shepherd of shepherds in ancient Israel was King David, who, before he was king, was a shepherd boy visiting his older brothers away at the front, a shepherd who stepped up defeat Goliath, propelling him to power and the throne. In this parable, God is strong and vigilant, gentle and powerful, a monarch to end all monarchs.

If we peek ahead a passage, we find the third parable of this set, the story of the Prodigal Son, which shows up in worship during Lent. Here God is a loving father, generous and heartbroken, waiting by the phone for that call from his beloved, estranged child. And to balance all that out, we have God as the woman who looks everywhere for that lost coin. As Biblical scholar Charlie Cousar points out, "No other parable in the New Testament presents a woman as a metaphor or allegory for God. This would shock and surprise the audience."¹ This image of God is more generous, more expansive, more feminine than the Pharisees are used to, than we are used to, the doting father and the determined woman, male and female, together as if there were room for many more images and understandings besides. God is more abundant than one gender, than any gender, and calls any who would believe otherwise to account. We cannot proclaim the Father of the Prodigal Son without also proclaiming the Woman of the Lost Coin.

But it doesn't stop there. God is extravagant with time, with imagery, with gender, and with love. It's worth noticing that a coin doesn't ever find someone who's looking for it. When was the last time your missing keys called out your name? (Maybe that's the next advancement in artificial intelligence.) Even a sheep doesn't find the flock again on its own, but shelters quietly in place, because it knows its bleating will also signal any predators about. There's

¹Charles Cousar, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, p. 71. Bartlett & Taylor, eds.

nothing for them to do but sit there, and it is God the woman, God the shepherd who finds them, finds us, and finds the folks over there that we've been grumbling about. God is throwing around love, throwing it at anything that moves, and at anything that doesn't move. It doesn't matter if the sheep is less distracted than it used to be or the coin feels sorry about getting lost. It matters that the shepherd, the woman, the God who made us, loves us. God's love is independent and uncontrollable, the prerogative of God alone, and the Scribes and Pharisees, Presbyterians and preachers of this world will have no effect on that. We can't make God love us more, by being Pharisees or lost sheep or both.

The choice to love belongs to God alone, and it seems that God experiences overwhelming joy in finding lost coins and sheep and people. These are stories of joy my friends, stories of what makes God happy, what makes God call together all the persons of the Trinity and all of the angels, too, for a party, the kind of party you know will be fun because the sinners and tax collectors will be there, and you know that they make any party better just by walking in the door. I ask you – who do you want at your next party, a Pharisee or a tax collector? If we were to ask God, God would simply say “yes” and then smile like a little kid on Christmas who has never seen so many wrapped presents. For God, it sparks joy.

If you're like me, a t-shirt-wearing member of Team Pharisee, the challenge of these parables is to learn how to find joy, deep joy, counter-cultural joy, joy that undermines the too-busy world and foils its twin henchmen, exhaustion and pride. Or, perhaps you feel more like a sheep or a coin, needing to be found, feeling lost, needing to experience God's love, needing to be celebrated joyfully when she picks you up at last and carries you home on her Divine shoulders. Your challenge may be to notice that love when it finds you, or at least shelter in place until it does. Or, maybe even it's both for you, the needing to be found and the needing to learn how to rejoice. That's okay, too. People can be more than one thing. And parables are like that – they keep working on us in new and strange ways all the time. Whatever the case, there is great abundance with our God, ridiculous abundance, abundant abundance in ways that are challenging and frustrating and glorious. So be excited. Rejoice, even. You're invited by God to the party, and she won't stop looking for you until you're there. She's got all the time in the world. Amen.