

Who Counts?

Luke 15: 1-7

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Back in elementary school, there was a kid in our class named Ricardo. He was quiet, kept mostly to himself. A sweet-tempered kid who stayed under the radar. One day Ricardo wasn't in school. Then another day...and another. Most of us didn't notice. Perhaps some of us just thought he was sick. But then his sister wasn't in her class either. The days became weeks and some of us began inquiring, “Where did Ricardo go?” Our teacher said his family abruptly picked up and moved, but it was all hush hush. What happened to Ricardo? One day he was there and the next he was gone.

When the Pharisee and scribes see Jesus hanging with the wrong crowd, they are quick to criticize him. So he responds by telling them a parable about someone who loses a sheep. There should be one hundred, but when the owner takes a head count, one of them is missing. So she leaves the ninety-nine behind to go looking for the one. We know the story well, yes?

Since a parable is like a portal with many dimensions, perhaps we step into the parable as identifying with the lost sheep. After all, there are plenty of times when we feel lost and alone. Moments when we've meandered off the path. And the good news is that God is looking for us. That is one option, but it also means that God is capable of losing track of us as well.

Other times we step through the parable as the shepherd — although the story does not mention a shepherd. This angle charges us with going out into the world seeking the lost and bringing them back into the fold. This also makes the lost sheep the “sinner” in need of repentance and us the surrogate savior. If there's one thing our evangelical culture loves, it's a good repentance story.

But both of these interpretations miss an important detail.

Remember, the Pharisee are judging Jesus, so he replies with, “Which one of you, having 100 sheep, losing one of them *does not* leave the ninety-nine in the ravenous wilderness to go after the lost one?” Especially when there is absolutely no guarantee we are going to find what we are looking for! Especially when the sheep is a wanderer who will probably just get lost again anyways. It doesn’t make sense in terms of how we spend our time and energy. It isn’t a good business strategy, or for that matter a ministry model! Which one of us would abandon the ninety-nine for the one when a bird in the hand is worth more than two in the bush?

Answer: Nobody!

You see, Jesus is inviting the Pharisee to see themselves as the ones who lost the sheep in the first place. God doesn’t lose people, we lose people. We get wrapped up in ninety-nine other things going on in our lives, we stop paying attention, or our priorities get scrambled, or we continue taking something for granted, and someone ends up falling through the cracks. I mean, but ninety-nine out of one hundred is as successful as it gets statistically, right?

Except, people aren’t statistics...

So, do you remember what happens in the story when the person who loses the sheep finds it? She throws a massive fiesta—all over finding one sheep! And, Jesus says, there is joy in heaven over the one who repents more than the ninety-nine who don’t need to. And here’s the tricky part: who in the story needs to repent? The sheep who wandered away, or the one who lost track of the sheep in the first place? Jesus is being criticized for “eating with sinners,” but God doesn’t lose people, we do.

I don’t know what ever happened to Ricardo. He may have simply moved. His family may have been deported. He may have grown up as a “Dreamer.” We never found out...all we knew was he was there one day and gone the next.

The truth is, there are many Ricardo’s in our world. Over 2,700 children and counting have been separated from their families under the current administration’s policies. Many more are lost or unaccounted for.

There are 2.1 million “Dreamers” who could disappear from right under our noses, even though most have grown up trusting that this is their home and we are their flock.

These aren’t statistics, these are people who count. And whenever the church does whatever she can to be in relationship with those who slip through society’s cracks, ironically it is the church who is found.

Because that is when we become whole again. And that is when the party begins.