

Luke 15:1-10 study begins with the ever-present concern for the company one keeps.

As it is said, "Birds of a feather flock together."

In the ancient world, as with today, individuals were concerned that those with whom one passes one's time will naturally have an effect on a person. This concern was present in humorous documents, such as Theophrastus's *Characters*, in ancient biographies such as Plutarch's *Lives*, and in educational treatises such as Quintilian's *Orator's Education*.

Theophrastus, in his introduction to the *Characters*, indicates that studying and associating with good characters produces individuals who embody the same (*Char. proem.* 1.3). Plutarch suggests that his biographies exist "as a mirror" of the audience's own lives (*Tim.* 235). Similarly, education was not so much something that student learned, but something that teachers *imprinted* upon a student, much like the imprint of a coin (see Luke 20:25).

Through imitation of their teacher, students received not only educational but moral imprints. This imprinting occurred within the church as well as those preparing for baptism—catechumens—learned from their priests the core tenets of faith. Imitation of virtue and of faith, in this logic, leads to actual virtue and belief.¹

The Pharisees and scribes' grumbling at the beginning of Luke 15 would have likely been expected among ancient auditors of Luke.

Jesus, however, changes the stakes of the conversation in the parables that follow: "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?" The implied answer is that Jesus' auditors would affirm the decision to look for the lost sheep. The parable spares us any indication of the shepherd's practical considerations.² The wilderness of Judaea is hilly and has many places sheep could navigate but humans could not, which could make the sheep difficult to find. The myriad predators (jackals, hyenas,

leopards, and foxes) would have rendered the sheep vulnerable. The shepherd looks for the sheep with ostensibly little hope of finding it or finding it alive. Against all odds to the contrary, the shepherd discovers the sheep and restores it to the flock.

Likewise, a woman who loses a drachma lights her home and sweeps it until she discovers it. Depending on whom we consult, a drachma is either a half-day or a whole day's wages. There is considerable debate regarding the relative significance of the drachma to the woman: while some have suggested that the ten drachma represent the woman's life savings, others suggest the woman is wealthy because she appears to own her home.³ The woman finds the drachma and invites her friends to celebrate with her.

In both parables, the shepherd and the woman are responsible for both the loss and the recovery. Neither the sheep nor the coin repent, nor is it expected that they would. Upon recovering the sheep and the coin, respectively, the shepherd and the woman call their neighbors and friends to rejoice with them. In their joy and in their celebration, one wonders whether they spent more than they gained in the recovery in the lost sheep and coin.⁴ The measure of rejoicing might suggest to us that the recovered object was irretrievably lost and its recovery was unlikely—if not impossible.

Luke correlates the lost sheep and drachma with sinners and the rejoicing ones with heavenly beings. Commentators frequently associate the shepherd and the woman with God, prudently associating God with these characters *after* the sought-after object has been lost but not before. If God is the one who searches, is God also the one who loses the objects? While sitting with this question may prove a fruitful endeavor for some, here hearkening to the notion of imprint is instructive. To lose a sinner would be tantamount to losing part of Godself, inasmuch as the sinner bears the imprint of the Creator. The recovery of the sinner is, then, not simply the recovery of something that has been lost; it is the recovery of God's image-bearer. What is more, it is the recognition that God's imprint is indelible—even on tax collectors and sinners.

In response to the charge that Jesus associates with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus's response is, "Obviously." Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus dines with the poor and the rich, the tax collectors, sinners, *and* the Pharisees. What, then, might Luke be trying to imprint upon us? In the case of these parables, at least, it seems Luke invites us to the table with the tax collectors and sinners, inviting us to find God's image in all that seems lost, for "nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37, 18:27).

Notes:

1. A few recent psychological studies have affirmed this relationship. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier> indicates a positive correlation between gratitude and happiness. Other studies offer tentative conclusions that correlate a positive relationship among gratitude, forgiveness, and well-being, and negative relationships among anger and forgiveness (Shraddha Sharma and Ira Das, "Contribution of Anger, Gratitude and Subjective Well-being as Predictors of Forgiveness," *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology* 8:3 [2017]: 407-410). Though the sample size is quite small, many would tend to expect such a relationship among gratitude, forgiveness, and happiness and anger and forgiveness.
2. Some have suggested that the shepherd's behavior would be expected (Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, ANTC [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996], 238).
3. As to the former, see Joel B. Green, *Luke*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1997), 576. John T. Carroll lists both possibilities (*Luke*, NTL [Westminster John Knox Press, 2012], 312).
4. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that mutton is the dish du jour (*Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* [Harper One, 2014], 37).