



Jules Olitski, *strip heresy*

on otherness

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scripture reading: Luke 15

“Real love brings out the ‘otherness’ of the beloved.” (Wendy Beckett)

This is true not only about our human relationships, but also about our relationship with God, the divine Beloved. Real love knows about the danger of turning the other into an object of possession or projection. Idolatry is the desire to create God in one’s own image. It makes God small, predictable and controllable. Genuine love is concerned with protecting the integrity and independence of the other. Interpreting sacred texts is an act of devotion and faces a similar challenge: How do you bring out the ‘otherness’ of the

text, in a way that the parables of this morning are allowed to speak to us about God’s ‘otherness’?

In an interview, the painter Jules Olitski (1922-2007) shared how he gets on his knees and prays before he paints. “I pray that God will let me get out of the way.” His abstract art is process based. He has no idea what the painting will be about, until he starts painting. In order to eliminate any pre-conceptions, he tried to paint blind-folded or use unconventional tools. A certain playfulness must always be at work. But it does not take away the need to be serious and focused. His experience is that „the more you get into it, the more you are not there.“

Parables and abstract art at their best have something in common: They are able to preserve an „otherness“ that speaks to you in a way that it makes you feel important. They want you to come into their presence and spend more time there. The painting I have chosen is titled „strip heresy“. Jesus taught about God’s love in a way that was seen to be heretical and blasphemous. But it was at that moment that he brought out the ‘otherness’ of the Beloved. What I hear the parables in Luke 15 wanting to say to us is that real love is a love for the lost, is a love that does not give up, and is a love that is fueled by joy.

A love for the lost

The author of Luke's Gospel makes it very clear what he has identified as the core of God's 'otherness': It is a profound love for the lost. This is why he positions the three parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son at the centre of the Gospel in chapter 15. The search for the lost lies at the heart of God's vision for the world. It is seen to be one of the fundamental criteria to measure the health of a society. And Jesus is the one who has been sent from head office to evaluate the progress and implement new strategies to transform communities along those basic principles of love and compassion.

It is a radical program that calls for radical personal transformation. Nature can be very harsh and cruel. The principle of selection accepts that what is weak and sick will not survive. What is lost does not have to be found, but should rather be left to die. There are those who believe that culture should simply imitate nature: What is deemed lost is marginalized and even destroyed. It is a barbaric ideology that preaches that some lives have greater value than other lives. Your value is determined by your usefulness, by what you are able to produce or consume. But God's program of a new dawn is meant to challenge us to transcend such barbaric principles and helps us to

live into a stronger commitment to humanize our life together. And Jesus has been tasked with its implementation.

It is through these three parables that Jesus attempts to create a stronger awareness of and sensitivity to the fact that we all want to live and that there is nothing worse than to feel that I am considered as a lost case, not worthy of any help or support. But those committed to resist this ancient "struggle for life", are seen to cross a major threshold into a new realm, a new world, called the kingdom of God, a place where God's justice will slowly but surely prevail and where searching for the lost is a fundamental principle. The ultimate challenge of this vision is: How do we no longer live a life at the expense of other life.

Maybe this is why Jesus portrays the lost in a way that evokes deep empathy: Who doesn't want to be a soft sheep, carried home on someone's shoulder. Who doesn't want to be a coin saved from a dark and dusty corner, finally valued and appreciated. And we should take note that in contrast to Matthew's version of the parable, where the lost sheep goes astray, in Luke the shepherd is the one who loses his or her sheep. This idea is re-inforced by the parable of the woman who loses one of her coins. And does the father of the son not also act irresponsibly when handing over his inheritance so willingly?

In a subtle way Jesus holds the religious leaders to whom he talks to accountable. What is their role in the unfolding drama? It is no good pointing fingers at those deemed lost. To what extent has their own arrogance and self-righteousness contributed to the most vulnerable feeling rejected not only by them, but also by God? In what ways is the system itself responsible for the plight of the sick and poor? It raises the question of sustainability: How does one search in a way that it also affects the context within which one lives. It has been argued that the woman looking for the coin is acting in a more sustainable and convincing way. She lights a light and cleans up the house. In the end not only the coin is found, but the house is again in order. In contrast, the shepherd only fetches the sheep from the desert without transforming the desert.

What then, if the custodians of law and morality also belong to those that need to be found, rescued from simplistic and unsustainable self-justifications. There is a gentle echo of how the prophet Nathan convicted king David of hypocrisy. David's outrage at injustice turned right against him, when Nathan revealed: You are the man! You are the one who stole the poor man's sheep when you took Uria's wife and sent him to the front line to die. Psychologists remind us to be attentive to those moments when our reactions to other people are particularly strong and emotional.

This can both be both extreme anger or excessive empathy. Very often they touch something within ourselves, that still needs to be found and owned. The parables complete their „otherness“ when they are able to not only evoke empathy for the lost, but to send us all on a search for what is lost within us. This is the beginning of true transformation. This was and is the strength of Jesus' vision: It begins with myself.

After two years of psycho-dynamic therapy I was confronted with a simple but powerful question: "Robert, who do you try to save?" It was a wonderful set up. I had a personal therapist, a practicing Jew and doctor, with whom I could discuss the challenges of my ministry. The spell was broken, when I realized that I was trying to save myself. Real love brings out the otherness within yourself, the otherness that needs to be embraced.

A love that does not give up

Another aspect of the otherness of God's love is the promise to not ever give up on us. While we find it hard to show such unconditional affection and care, Jesus' parables introduce us to a love that will not stop searching until it has found what is lost. This comes out clearly in the parable of the lost coin. Can a coin turn around? No! A coin can only be found. It cannot do anything to be found. It remains passive. Nevertheless Luke includes the coin in the idea of conversion. Luke imagines a love

for the lost which is independent of those lost wanting or not wanting such love, independent of them turning around or not.

We know very little about the lost sheep. It might very well have tried to run away further, when it saw the shepherd - out of resentment towards the shepherds neglect or out of a desire for freedom. But maybe a sheep's emotional make up is not as complex as ours. What matter is that the shepherd cares for the sheep independently of its behavior. The search is unconditional. It gives expression to the experience that God gives value to each human being independent of their behavior, no matter how lost they are. God looks for human beings even if they do not look for God. We might give up on people, but God will not.

In Spain, for almost two weeks, a team of 300 people tried to rescue a two year old who had fallen into a borehole - 100 meters deep, but only 25 centimeters wide. The family were out in the country side for a picnic. The child explored the surroundings and fell into an abandoned and open borehole. We cannot imagine what the family went through. Day and night the rescue team tried to drill a second, parallel and wider hole in order to then create a tunnel to reach the child. There was hope at the beginning, but extremely hard rocks slowed down the drilling work. In the end they managed to reach the child, but came too late. Despite the defeat and disappointment,

the dedication of those 300 people to save the child remains an inspiration to all of us. Their devotion and commitment affirmed the child's unique value and dignity. The Talmud reminds us: „Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saves and entire world.“ (Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 4:1)

When I get to watch a German crime series, I am always astounded of the size of the team seconded to solve a murder case. Unfortunately, very often this is not the case in Cape Town. It all depends where the murders happens and which police station is involved. Sadly especially those stations who have to deal with high murder rates are understaffed and overworked. Some lives are still considered more valuable than other lives. Apartheid's legacy keeps opening up old wounds. Family and community members searching deserted fields for a missing child are sadly not an uncommon sight.

But the challenge of not giving up also affects those whose work is concerned with finding those deemed lost by society. There is a poem by Erich Fried that speaks to that daily struggle of not giving up hope and the pressure at time to justify one's ongoing dedication to a certain cause or person. The poem is titled "It is what it is":

*It is nonsense
says reason
It is what it is
says love*

*It is calamity
says calculation
It is nothing but pain
says fear
It is hopeless
says insight
It is what it is
says love*

*It is ludicrous
says pride
It is foolish
says caution
It is impossible
says experience
It is what it is
says love*

The poem presents us with a resistance that Jesus also had to face - the voices of reason, calculation, fear, insight, pride, caution, and experience. They come to us from the outside and from the inside.

There are many reasons to give up in our search for the lost - many good reasons, as Fried demonstrates. And again, before we engage in our search for the lost, it is important to reflect on the kind of unreasonable abundance and extravagance, maybe even wastefulness of love with which God keeps searching what is lost within us. Only once we discover the impossibility of such love, we will be able to be transparent enough that such love can shine through us.

The poem can function as a wonderful tool, a kind of check list, to work through all the unconscious voices that often question our commitment to Christ's vision. I am

taking the example of our prison ministry and take you through my own 100 meters hurdle race:

It is nonsense says reason. Is that really worth it? Are there not more deserving candidates, who have not committed a crime, but need your help? Should you not start with the victims?

It is calamity says calculation. Why would you spend so much time and petrol to drive all the way to Pollsmoor. Be realistic. Out of a hundred, how many were saved? One!

It is nothing but pain says fear. There are too many risks involved. You will get wounded. You are not a trained psychologist or social worker.

It is hopeless says insight. At the moment we have overcrowded prisons and not enough programs of restorative justice. And when they come out they will have to go back to the same old communities.

It is ludicrous says pride. They play a game. They are manipulative. They use you.

It is foolish says caution. You are going to be sucked into a bottomless pit of needs. The problem is systemic. Don't be naive.

It is impossible says experience.

"It is what it is" does not have to be an expression of indifference, acceptance, surrender, or fatalism. It can be read in such a way, but it can also be interpreted as an invitation to accept ambiguity and complexity as the openings for something radically new. "It is what it is" is not an utterance of

resignation, because it is love that says it. And that changes everything.

A love fueled by joy

The more sobering and hopeless the circumstances of the search, the greater the joy about a successful intervention. This is the third and final aspect that characterizes the otherness of God's love: There is a time to mourn and there is a time to celebrate. Our parables describe the experience of being lost as one of isolation and loneliness. To be found is to be brought back into community. The joy of finding is shared with others. Duty might tell us not to waste any time and move on to the next task. But grace calls us to pause and reflect and cherish, that with this one person an entire world has been saved. When the father embraces the son, he does not stipulate a probation period. The joy of homecoming and re-union is transformative at many different levels. It restores the son's dignity and affirms him in his unique worth. There is no restraint in the embrace and it speaks once again of how "real loves brings out the otherness of the beloved."

As we continue to explore how to respond to the mystery of God's love in all its various aspects of otherness, I invite you to be guided by Carl Jung's advice, when he says: "Do not compare, do not measure. No other way is like yours. All other ways deceive and tempt you. You must fulfill the way that is in you."

May such fulfillment include words that become parables, and parables that grow into large paintings, in whose presence people will feel important again, valued in their otherness.