

THE GIFT OF GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

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Jesus said, "*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?*" (Luke 15:4)

I believe it was the legendary comedian, George Burns, who said that the first thing he did every morning was read the obituaries. "If I don't see my name listed there," he quipped, "I proceed with breakfast." I, too, usually scan the obituaries of *The New York Times*, not to dwell on them and not to check if my own name is there, but often to read the story of how someone lived his or her life. Case in point is John R. Coleman, who died at age 95 last Tuesday, and received a half-page write-up and three pictures in Friday's paper. I'd never heard of Coleman before, but I was intrigued, so on I read.

John R. Coleman was an economist, a prolific author, and a university professor at M.I.T. and later Carnegie-Mellon. His lectures were so well received that he became a television commentator on the relatively newfound medium, and later host of the program, "Money Talks." In 1967 he was elected President of Haverford College in Pennsylvania, and used his influence there to press for the admission of women to the college, and to oppose the Vietnam War.

With all of his achievements, however, the period of John Coleman's life that seems to have defined his legacy concerns a sabbatical that he took while at Haverford in the early 1970s. He was concerned about a great gap that he perceived between the ivory towers in which he lived, and the life of the manual laborer. Thus, his time away from academia consisted of taking on and working various blue-collar jobs. He dug ditches for sewers in Atlanta, cleaned streets and hauled garbage in Maryland, and made sandwiches and salads in Boston. Upon returning to Haverford he wrote a book entitled *Blue-Collar Journal: A College President's Sabbatical*, in which he reflected on what the experience taught him. Later in life he would say, "*There's a restlessness in me, a desire to walk in other people's shoes.*"

That restlessness, that desire, that move Coleman made with this life, is not far from the spirit of today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. In the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, Jesus wants to give his hearers a gift. He wants to give us the gift of God's perspective. He wants help us see the world through the eyes of God. Originally, Jesus aimed these two parables at the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a clergy order among the Jews who practiced for themselves and did their best to enforce on others a strict keeping of the Mosaic Law. They believed that the Law of Moses was the clearest lens to see the world as God sees it. Only the Commandments could allow them to discern what was truly right and wrong, what was good and evil, and who was clean and unclean.

If the Pharisees judged you to be on the wrong side of the ledger, it was your responsibility to clean up your act, repent, and return to the company of respectable, God-fearing people. To be sure, tax-collectors, thieves, and prostitutes could amend their lives and repent, assuming they could find a new way to support themselves. But many of those whom the Pharisees judged to be sinners could not repent. Lepers, widows, the poor, even orphans had no power in themselves to help themselves. Did the Pharisees do anything to life them out of their misery? No, it seems that

they devoted most of their energy to keeping themselves apart from the unclean, unrighteous masses. What is more, they would grumbled and growled when sinners came too close.

The Pharisees grumbled at Jesus because they believed he cavorted too closely with sinners. In response Jesus challenged them to look at the great gap between the ivory towers in which they lived, and the daily plight of the people whom they were judging. Put yourself in someone else's shoes; put yourself in someone else's place, he would imply. Whose place? Whose shoes? Jesus bid the Pharisees to look at the dilemma not from the perspective of themselves and the Law, not even from the perspective of the unclean, but from the perspective of God. Try this: put yourself in God's place. Look at these people on the outside as God looks at them. Jesus wanted to give them the gift of God's perspective.

Imagine that you are a shepherd and you have a hundred sheep. Which one of you, upon losing one, will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go and search for the one that is lost until you find it? Jesus might well have put it this way: What parent among you, having three children, is satisfied at the end of the day when only two are safely home? You can be sure that the one child who is missing consumes the parent's thoughts. God's perspective is the gift that Jesus was trying to give the Pharisees and us. It's the same story with the matching parable of the woman who lost a coin and turned her house upside down until she found it. Why would she hunt high and low for the one when she had nine others? Clearly, the coins weren't pocket change to be earned today and spent tomorrow. Some deep emotional attachment is involved here, so the woman must search for what is lost until she finds it. There again is God's perspective on those who are in any way lost. When people have followed too much the devices and desires of their hearts and have become lost in sin, lost in despair and cynicism and meaninglessness, lost in hatred and violence, this grieves the heart of God. God takes on a consuming concern for them: like a shepherd for his lost sheep, like a woman for her lost coin. This is the gift of God's perspective. The question is, do you want it?

Many people actually decline such a gift. They say, "No thank you." They'd rather trust their own two eyes rather than some wandering sage who told parables two-thousand years ago. They'd rather see the world through their own filters of culture, class, race, and religion. Besides, what kind of a shepherd leaves ninety-nine successfully well-behaved sheep in the wilderness to go after the wandering one? The shepherd puts ninety-nine at risk for the sake of one. It makes no sense. It would be far better to accept a one-percent loss as the cost of doing a day's worth of business. What is more, we would need to see some proper repentance out of that one sheep before it returns to the fold. The one-percent need to repent. The woman searching for the coin makes no good economic sense either. She finds one lost coin and then throws a party to celebrate? The cost of the party is going to cost more than the coin. Do the math.

Still others may object for different reasons. The gift, they say, is of no substance. It is mere sentimentality. So what if God – if there is a God – has deep love for the lost? The homeless fill the streets, refugees continue to flee war and violence, and millions live lost lives of desperation under oppressive regimes. Fifteen years on from the grim anniversary the nation marks today, terrorists still stalk the earth and steal the lives of innocent people. Where is the evidence that God is out searching for the lost as the shepherd and the woman searched? Thanks for the parables, nice though they are, but their suggestion of God's active intervention will only lead to disappointment.

What do we say to these things? First of all, it's important with any parable not to read too much into it, and force it to go where Jesus never intended it to go. Jesus did not mean the parable to be a textbook on first-century Palestinian shepherding. That being said, I believe we can see enough in the parable to relax about the ninety-nine sheep left in the wilderness. Notice at the end

of the little story that the shepherd comes *home* with the lost sheep around his shoulders. He doesn't go back to the field to find whatever might remain of the ninety-nine sheep, because when he left on his rescue mission, we can assume that he put *another shepherd* in charge of his flock. The other shepherd would stay with the flock and bring them home. The ninety-nine would never be at risk, so don't worry about them. To worry about them is to be sidetracked and miss the point of the parable. We also might want to consider that the one lost sheep has been you and me more times than we'd like to admit. Spiritually speaking, we are not the ninety-nine percent. We don't get to chant in that march. We are the one-percent. Paul the Apostle was admitting as much in today's reading from 1st Timothy (1:12-17): *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.*

Likewise the coin. What Jesus was probably referring to was the traditional wedding head-dress of a woman of the time. Sewn into the piece were ten coins. It was a married woman's most precious possession, like a wedding ring today or some family heirloom. The full set of coins conveyed wholeness, completion, even blessing. So don't pay attention to the face value of the one coin, but rather, the woman's tremendous emotional attachment to it, and her joy in finding it.

The point of the parables is not repentance. A sheep cannot repent. A coin cannot repent. The point of the parables is God's joy in recovering what is lost. Best of all, God wants us to share the joy of the shepherd and the joy of the woman, even in the divine joy of heaven. What we're talking about is not mere happiness that rises and falls depending on outward circumstances. No, what Jesus means to convey is the living joy of God. How do we receive such joy? It's a paradox. It's called the way of the cross. It's to trust that Jesus has gone ahead of us to open the gates of Paradise. Now all we need do is lay down your wandering lives, take up the cross, and follow Jesus. God's joy is to be found in joining the Great Shepherd of the Sheep in his search for the lost.

You see, God does intervene in the world with all the physicality of a shepherd searching for his sheep, or a woman searching for her coin. How? God intervenes not as many people automatically think: not with lightning bolts, floods, famine, or plagues. Not with earthquake, wind, or fire. These are what the insurance industry calls acts of God. But they are not acts of God, they are acts of nature. The acts of God are you and me. God intervenes in the world by merging his Spirit with our spirits so that we become the church – the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Christ in the world.

At one point in his life, John R. Coleman stepped down from his ivory tower, emptied himself into the form of a servant, and searched out others by joining them. No one is perfect and I mean not to canonize someone I never met and before Friday never knew existed at all. But when I read Coleman's obituary I heard a faint echo of the life of Christ, *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7).* Let this same mind be in you, writes the Apostle Paul. "Come join the search," says the Lord Jesus in his parables, as he waits for willing souls to respond: "Here we are, Lord, send us."

The gift on offer today is God's perspective. It is the grace of seeing the world through the eyes of the one who made it and loves it. It is the path to God's joy. Do you want to be on it? "*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?*"