

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)*

Perhaps you know the story of the young girl who was struggling in her English composition course. She was bright and quick and had a good command of the language for a child her age. But her troubles began when the assignment was to write a story about a poor family. The girl thought and thought but soon found that she had nothing to write. Her perspective was too limited. You see, her family was the wealthiest in the community. She had never known poverty herself. Indeed, her lifestyle had sheltered her from even seeing poverty in others. She had no frame of reference. She was stumped.

Finally the little girl confessed to the teacher that she didn't know where to begin. The teacher encouraged her to try as best as she could to look at life from another perspective. "Put yourself in someone else's shoes; use your imagination," said the teacher. "Imagine that nobody in your house has any money, or food, or even a change of clothes. Think what life would be like for your family," said the teacher. Well, the teacher's words seemed to inspire the little rich girl. So she went back to her desk and she imagined what it would be like for her family to be poor. Finally, she began her story:

Once upon a time there was a very poor family. The mother was poor, the father was poor, and the children were poor. The two nannies were poor, the housekeeper was poor, and the personal chef was poor. Even the pool boy was poor. They were all frightfully poor!

How difficult it is to view life from the vantage point of someone else. How difficult it is to see, to understand, to take on the perspective of another, especially someone who is different from you. When disagreements arise – as they often do these days over issues that really matter – my first recourse is to justify my own way of seeing things. Is it any different with you? Admit it: even if it's just in the privacy of your own thoughts, you go all 'judgey' on others. Perhaps you might take the added step of pointing out the fuzzy math and faulty thinking you detect in the other's viewpoint. I mean, they are usually obvious, aren't they – the faults and flaws in others? If only the rest of the world could just see things the way you and I do, imagine the peace and harmony we would have, is the conclusion we usually draw. It is a rare moment when we peer beyond our own blinders to behold the validity of other opinions – be they political, social, or cultural. How difficult it is for us to get out of ourselves and take on the perspective of those outside our particular fold.

In the time and place of Jesus, it was difficult, if not impossible for the Pharisees to take on any other viewpoint than their own. The Pharisees, the perpetual bad-guys of the Gospels, are at it again in today's reading from Luke. The Pharisees were a clerical order among the Jews who practiced for themselves, and did their best to enforce on others, a strict keeping of the Mosaic Law. They didn't have just Ten Commandments, they discerned over 600 laws in the Torah. To clarify the following of them all they had added layer upon layer of new commandments. They were consumed with following all these laws to the letter, thinking that doing so would keep them righteous before God. Their goal was to stay clean, so they had commandments about whom they could touch and whom they couldn't, and on what day of the week they could or couldn't touch this or that possibly unclean person. The Law of Moses was their only perspective.

When Jesus came along he did everything wrong from the Pharisee's point of view. If Jesus really wanted to be a respected teacher of Israel – to say nothing about being the Messiah, as people suspected he might be – the Pharisees believed that Jesus should have stayed clean as they were clean. But instead, Jesus was spending his time with all the wrong people. The lepers were unclean, the widows were unclean, the poor were unclean, even his obtuse disciples were unclean. They were all frightfully unclean. What is more, Jesus was known to dine with those who were unclean through their own fault: tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, and swindlers. The Pharisees murmured and grumbled about the company Jesus kept.

The Pharisees get a bad rap. If they were trying too hard to follow God's commandments, well, at least they were trying. On many occasions Jesus sat down with the Pharisees to redirect their zeal. In doing so, he would challenge them like the teacher who challenged the little girl to take on another perspective. Put yourself in someone else's shoes. Put yourself in someone else's place, he would imply. Whose place? Whose shoes? Jesus challenged the Pharisees to look at the situation not from the perspective of themselves, not even from the perspective of the unclean, but from the perspective of God. Imagine: put yourself in God's place. Look at these people on the outside as God looks at them, is what Jesus challenged the Pharisees to do. But how hard it was for the Pharisees to take on another perspective, and how hard it is for us.

We struggle with the assignment. Therefore, Jesus told two parables to help the Pharisees and us see the sinful, struggling world from God's perspective. What does God think of a world that has wandered far away from his purposes? Well, 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? And when you have found it, don't you lay it on your shoulders and come home rejoicing? The parable illustrates how God feels every time someone outside of his fold is brought inside. God rejoices. But do we rejoice? I'm afraid the parable catches us too often not rejoicing with God, but grumbling with the Pharisees. Ask yourself: what is the question that always nags in your mind about this parable? It is this: *What about the ninety-nine sheep that the shepherd left behind?* Shouldn't the shepherd have stayed with them? What kind of shepherd is this, putting the good sheep at risk for the sake of the wandering one-percent? What about us?

Let me give you some interpreter's tips for this parable. First of all, most of us assume that we are among the ninety-nine sheep who need no rescuing. Some of us may want to rethink the fuzzy math and faulty logic by which we reckon ourselves as righteous. Secondly, notice at the end of the parable 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 miss the point of the parable. The point is that the shepherd feels so intensely for the one lost sheep that he can think of nothing else. He must go after it and save it, and when he finds it he rejoices. There you have God's perspective. Every person, no matter how notorious a sinner, is of infinite value to God, and precious in his sight. Look at it this way: no parent with three children is satisfied at the end of the day if only two are safely home. You can be sure that the one who is missing consumes the parent's thoughts. God's perspective: Jesus invites us to see the world through it.

It's the same story in the matching parable of the woman who lost a coin. Why would she hunt high and low for the one when she had nine others? Why would she throw a party after finding the coin that would probably cost more than the coin was worth? It's likely that Jesus was referring to the traditional wedding head-dress of a woman of the time. Sewn into the wedding head-dress were ten coins. It was like a wedding ring. So the point is not the face value of the coins, but the tremendous emotional attachment to the set. The woman must search for what is

lost until she finds it. There again is God's perspective on people 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.

Still I struggle with the assignment. Still I wonder: from whose perspective in the parable should we look on life? Should we who are here in the church look at the world from the perspective of the ninety-nine sheep who are safe in the fold and need no rescuing? As I mentioned before, we should beware of any overly optimistic accounting of our merits. God knows how we each need to be saved from the daily wanderings of our own hearts. So what then? Should we look on life from the perspective of the rogue sheep who strays, *miserable offenders that we are*? That too may be a flawed perspective. To identify ourselves too closely and too often with the one wandering sheep may lead us only to a tragic shirking of our responsibility as members of the Body of Christ. "I'm too much of a sinner to do any good for the cause of Christ," is the excuse you hear from folks who think of themselves as perpetually wandering sheep."

Friends, the perspective that Jesus challenges us to take on is his own: the Good Shepherd on a rescue mission to retrieve the lost and increase the joy. It's been said that the Church is the world's only organization that exists for the sake of those who don't belong to it. Make no mistake, our aim is to bring more people inside. God rejoices when we do. To this end we keep the church doors open every day of the week. To reach out we've been live-streaming the 11 am Sunday service. And lately we've moved the 6 pm Sunday service to the main church so that more people might find their way inside.

Sometimes I think of the church's mission in terms of a family cat that we had when I was growing up. She was already fully grown when we adopted her. We brought her home from the vet, gave her the imaginative name of "Tabby," and made her part of the family. Tabby was to be an inside cat. My mother did not want fleas, ticks, and dead rodents brought into the house. But Tabby had other ideas. The great outdoors called to her, and she was prone to wander. In fact, we had to be careful anytime we opened any door. The odds were she was crouched around a corner looking for her chance to bolt. When she saw her opening, she would wiggle her backside, then dash to the open air. To paraphrase today's reading from Exodus, *She was quick to turn aside from the way that we commanded her*. On these occasions of Tabby's great escapes we'd all have to drop what we were doing and join the search. "Blow the trumpet! Sound the alarm! She's done it again." Since her fur was mostly white she was usually easy to spot, but she was strong and fast so catching her was always an ordeal.

Every time she got outside I remember being terrified. I feared she was going to be hit by a car or simply wander so far away she'd be lost. Once she climbed out an upstairs window and perched herself atop the pitched roof of our three-story house. A fall from up there would have exhausted all of her nine lives. Somehow we always managed to rescue Tabby from her many excursions. To be sure, carrying her inside was not a matter of laying her on your shoulders. It was more about holding her at arms-length to avoid being raked by her twenty sharp claws. But we loved her and breathed a sigh a relief every time we retrieved her. We rejoiced.

Looking back, I think it was the first time I caught a glimpse of God's perspective on a world that seems hell-bent on bolting from the ways of the Lord. God rejoices when the lost are found. So *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 you find it?*