

Sermon: The One Lost

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I still recall vividly the time when my younger son Neo lost his wallet. It was his first ever wallet, containing his first bank card and a student ID. At first, we thought Neo had simply misplaced it, and it was probably hiding in some odd corner of his room, waiting to be found. So Daisy and I helped him to search for it. We retraced his steps, looked everywhere that he might've been, turned over every corner of the house, but to no avail. Days turned into weeks, yet his wallet did not turn up.

So, in accepting the loss and in annoyance, I guided him to replace his lost cards—alerting the bank, contacting the school, etc. At least, he was still young back then, did not have a 'fat wallet', not so much that needed to be replaced. Chalk that up as a learning experience. No sooner had we finally replaced his lost cards, did Daisy find that lost wallet. Sure enough, in an odd corner we had all somehow overlooked. I must admit there was no celebration in my house that day, more of a nervous laughter from Neo, and bittersweet sigh from us...hehhh!

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today we are reflecting on the condition of lost and being found. We come to the two stories that Jesus told in Luke 15, a wandering sheep and a devoted shepherd, a lost coin and a determined woman. Two similar stories of finding worth in the very act of searching for the lost, and the corresponding joy and public celebration once what was lost is finally found. Two seemingly straightforward stories on the surface, but upon careful reading and consideration, point to something unexpected.

First of all, the writer of Luke set these two parables of Jesus in the context of an adversarial dialogue. *"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.""* (Luke 15:1-2)

At that time, tax collectors were fellow Jews who were gainfully employed by the Roman authority, for the sole purpose of collecting taxes from other Jews. Due to the unpopularity of the Empire, the heavy burden of multitude of taxes, and the fact that most collectors were also dishonest—keeping extra portion for themselves—tax-collection was viewed by the

Jews as the lowest of low form of employment. Yet, Jesus seems to delight in making friends in low places, always hanging out with those who are considered to be the margin of the society, the undesirable, the outcast.

So it is no surprise that Pharisees and scribes, the upstanding religious authority of his day, would complain about this puzzling behaviour of Jesus. Anyone who calls himself a Rabbi, a teacher, ought to behave in a proper and respectable manner! Shouldn't they? Teach the sinners, yes, but God forbid, one should never eat with **them**, never break bread with **them**.

In response to that line of thinking, Jesus proceed to tell the parables of the lost sheep. "*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?*", asked Jesus. This rhetorical question seems to point to an implied answer that is we all do it, at least we all should. Should one to find oneself losing a sheep, one would leave the rest of ninety-nine, in the wilderness no less, and go and search for **the one lost**. Wouldn't you?

A former parishioner of mine worked as a manager of a crowded shoe store in a busy mall. He told me of the most unpleasant part of his job, that is theft prevention—a constant cat and mouse game of second guessing suspicious shoppers, of uncomfortable surveillance, and of the dreaded moment of catching a thief in the act. Even with beefed-up security measures such as installing high-tech camera, using magnetized tags, and better employee training, his store still faced the recurring problem of lost items to the tune of 3-5% of his total inventory. A 3-5% loss as the acceptable cost of doing business in the modern day.

Perhaps, you wonder, shepherding in the ancient time might be different. Perhaps shepherds do care much more about their lost sheep. Well, I beg to differ.

Tucked inside the various laws and regulations of Moses is Exodus 22, in a section called the 'laws of restitution'. It gives detailed description on every conceivable way one could loose an ox or a sheep, and the corresponding way that loss is somehow mitigated. Reading through that section of Exodus 22, one gets a distinctive notion that even in the ancient time, the concept of an acceptable loss is widely, well, accepted. What would be considered as unacceptable is to leave one's flock out in the wilderness, unprotected from many possible harms, solely for the purpose of recovering that one lost—a mere 1% loss!

In a similar fashion, Jesus asked rhetorically again, “*Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?*” Facing now a 10% loss, perhaps that is more unacceptable. Perhaps it is more identifiable to us, losing a valuable possession, searching the house carefully until finding it.

However, both stories ends with a very public celebration, with both the shepherd and the woman inviting their friends and neighbours, saying “Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep or my lost coin.’ Lost in these stories is the cost of such a public celebration, ie. putting together a meal, perhaps even slaughtering a sheep, would far exceed the worth of what is actually recovered. What is going on here? I can just picture the original hearers of these stories, both saints and sinners, Pharisees and tax-collectors scratching their collective head, with a puzzled look on their faces...say what?

But the good thing about these parables is that Jesus doesn’t leave us scratching and guessing, he tells us what these stories are truly about. “*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.*” (v.7) “*Truly, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*” (v.10)

These stories, with the all-too-familiar condition of being lost, the exaggerated searches, followed by the over-the-top celebrations of being found, point to that which is beyond us, pointing to God. They point to God’s unconditional love and amazing grace for every one of us, without counting the cost. In a very real sense, we are all lost, everyone one of us in our own way.

We have all sinned, actually and theologically. In light of God’s original design we have all missed the mark, fallen away from what was originally intended. God could’ve simply fold-shop, wipe the slate clean, and start over again with a better creation, but God didn’t. Instead, God searches for each one of us. No loss is acceptable to this perfect God. Not ten percent, not five, not three, not even one percent. No loss is acceptable to Christ our saviour, who goes out and searches for us, in the most devoted and determined way, paying a very steep personal cost, until we are each and all found.

The Apostle Paul understands this God. He is the living and shining example of **the one lost** and found. “*The saying is sure and worthy of full*

acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

Paul describes himself as the Pharisee of all Pharisee, self righteous, self justified. In pursuing the Law to the extreme, he embraced the path of persecuting Christians, even to the point of killing them with glee. Yet on the road to Damascus, his encounter with the living Jesus changed his life, once and for all. He repented, came to understand the error of his way, turned then followed the way of Christ, and the heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents.

Could you imagine what that rejoicing is like? I could. I imagine it to be like a crowded stadium, with angels and saints as spectators, and a big, giant jumbotron hanging in the middle of that stadium. Whenever a sinner repents, her or his profile would be proudly displayed on the big screen, and the cloud of witnesses would clap and cheer—there goes another one. With upbeat music blaring in the background, they would high-fiving each other, make wave across the rows in celebration, shouting, “Let’s go Jesus, let’s go!”

Now, wouldn’t you like to join that celebration? I certainly would.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.