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When we lose direction in life, when we lose joy in living, when we lose benchmarks to believe in, when we lose meaning and focus, when we lose God, we become lost and wander into the unfamiliar.



WHEN SHARON and I were in Laos a little over a year ago, we had the opportunity to talk with and listen and learn about the work of the Mennonite Central Committee in that County. We learned a little about the nation, about projects carried out by M.C.C. and about the TV program LOST. These ex-pats, mostly Canadian, had all watched it. They talked about each episode. The characters were discussed, the twists in the plot, and they shared curiosity as to what would happen next!

For those of you who have not seen this ABC show, it is about the crash of Oceanic Flight 815 from Australia leaving 48 passengers stranded on an uncharted Island. They learn that banding together is their own hope for rescue but the Island and the survivors both hold many secrets. At least that is what the Internet told me.

The amateur psychologist within me mused why there would be such an attraction to this program from these workers in Laos. Was it that these folk, so far from home, identified with the survivors on Lost? Did they too feel lost, lost from the familiar, from family and favourite foods, from language



and culture? Were they too banding together in a hope to be rescued from this abyss of separation, from alienation and loneliness?

Alas, I was told no, it was just that they always share English movies or TV series with one another and *Lost* was presently the one in circulation. Corner Gas was next teaching me that I should stick to theology and leave the psychology to the Psychologists!

Yet this whole concept of being lost is an interesting one. We often think of loss as the physical, losing that object that we have had to along time, the watch, the broach, the picture, the book. Yet loss, in reality, is a feeling, an emotion. Objects or events become part of our life story and to lose them is to lose a piece of our identity. In some ways the physical loss is inconsequential, for physical objects can be replaced. Emotional loss however, carries a far deeper meaning.

This came home to me not long ago when I talked with two young lads about their bikes. Both pulled up to their destination; one threw his bike down on the ground while the other locked his up to a bicycle rack. To the boy who threw his on the ground, I asked, 'Where did you get the bike?'

'My parents bought it for me', he answered.

'Aren't you afraid it might get stolen?'

'Naw', he answered, 'it's an old bike and maybe if someone steals it, they'll buy me a new one!'

I asked the other child the same question. 'I bought it with my paper route money, 'he

said. 'No way I want it stolen.'

For one, the bicycle was an external gift but for the other, his similar bicycle represented an internal investment. For one it was an object, for the other, a subject.

Now Jesus was a story teller. Whereas the left side of the brain embraces the logical, the analytical world of fact, the right brain contains the random, the subjective side of story. Jesus' stories touched the right side of the brain. They embraced the imagination. We can read them as stories if we wish, or we can take them to the left side, to a deeper level and allow ourselves and our reality to be part of them.

In our Gospel lesson which Rick shared with us from Luke, Jesus tells two stories about loss. On a physical level, one could say these losses are external, a sheep and a coin, but on a deeper level, these losses are internal and reach right to the depth of identity, both ours and God's.

The shepherd had 100 sheep, one got away. Luke writes, '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?'

And then, 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?'

Perry Biddell points out the parallels in these stories

What man . . .

What woman



one sheep lost . . .
one coin lost

he searches and finds . . .
she searches and finds

Both call together their friends and proclaim, Rejoice with me for I have found my lost sheep, rejoice with me for I have found my lost coin. The lost has been found.

A shepherd and a woman, these are two interesting characters to reveal the nature of God. Shepherds were among the lowest of the low in New Testament times. They were considered unclean. Work rarely allowed them to attend the temple and this once noble profession was looked upon with disdain by many.

And if shepherds were low, women were even lower. They had no vote, no status, no say in most of life's affairs. Yet in these two were the higher qualities, the God-like qualities found

Crowds gathered around this Nazarene story-teller. Luke tells us tax collectors and sinners were there. So too were the Pharisees and the Scribes. They lived in two different worlds. To the Pharisees, the tax collectors, the sinners were lost. They had wandered off the path and beyond redemption. Indeed, Jesus was criticized for even talking with them. Luke writes, 'And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

But to Jesus, both were lost. The Tax-collectors and Sinners had adopted lifestyles which exploited others for personal gain.

They had lost their identity, their sense of rightness, their faith. Equally, the Scribes and Pharisees were lost. They had ritualized their religion and built walls around it to keep people out. They had lost humility, the power of forgiveness and that very simple command which calls us to love God and love one another. It is easy to get lost. It happens to us. Yet the important part of this story is not so much the lostness but the willingness to be found

We know the bigger losses in life. From the physical to the emotional, they impact upon us. It is said the life's major stresses revolve around loss . . . loss of job, through unemployment or retirement, loss of relationship, through breakup death or divorce, loss of home through a physical move and because so much of our identity is wrapped up in these things, they can cause of a loss of self-identity.

Yet I wonder if Jesus was talking about a different kind of loss, a more subtle loss which can creep into our lives without us even realizing it.

We can express it in different ways. I don't feel myself . . . I'm not sure which way to get or what to do . . . I don't know what to believe. Our lines become blurred. We wander off the pathway. We test the limits.

We see this within society. Think of how television has changed even in the past ten years. Graphic violence and sex, once monitored, now seem normative and we wonder why society is moving in that direction. We



read and hear of a loss of respect by many for authority, for education indeed for life itself. In that famous hymn Amazing Grace which we will sing at the close of this service, former slave trader John Newton writes of his lostness for all that was important and sacred and of value in life. I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see.

Sin, writes commentator Marion Soards, is the nature of lostness. When we lose direction in life, when we lose joy in living, when we lose benchmarks to believe in, when we lose meaning and focus, when we lose God, we become lost and wander into the unfamiliar.

A shepherd has one hundred sheep and one got away. Ninety-nine percent of the flock was still in tack. Most of us would stop and pick up a Leonie on the ground, but would we stop to pick up a penny or a nickel or even a dime? The shepherd did because each sheep was special to him. Each one was worth the search, the effort, the risk of going out to find it.

I am told that sheep have a way of wandering off. With heads down, they will nibble at the grass before them and when they realize they don't know where they are, they will lie down in panic and not get up until rescued.

People too wander off. When I served as a hospital chaplain, I visited many who might call themselves 'nominal Christians'. When I introduced myself as a minister, I would often hear . . . eh, I used to go to church or my mother was a Presbyterian or I went to Sunday school as a child. Yet we don't have

to go to hospitals to hear that. Our statistical year book shows a membership of 714 people plus adherents easily reaching one thousand. But, how many have wandered off, nibbled on the grass and now they forget how to come back.

Studies reveal that most people do not leave the church out of protest . . . the preacher is poor, the choir is flat, the demands are great. No, they just leave, little by little. And some are afraid to come back. One man said to me, I was away for years but realized I was missing something. I gathered up my nerve and entered the doors of the church I used to call home. However, I wasn't greeted with welcome, but with, well look who's here . . . the sky must be falling or something to see you back. I haven't gone back since, he told me.

How many of us seek out the lost, invite a friend or neighbour or perhaps an inactive member here on a Sunday morning. How many welcome the found, rejoice with each one present? Without one, they may not come. Without the other, they will not stay.

And there was a widow who lost a coin. She searched all day and even into the night to find it. Perhaps this coin was part of her wedding headdress and held great sentimental value. What we do know is that she shared that joy with others, inviting friends and neighbours alike and saying rejoice . . . there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

There is celebration in each one who finds their way home. There is exaltation when



people regain that sense of wholeness which comes with knowing that they are worth searching for God. And there is joy in being welcomed home.

What are the losses in your life . . . not those which are most obvious for they are easy to name, but those things which we have wandered away from, those values buried under the rubble, those faith dimensions of living compromised by greed like the tax collectors or arrogance like the scribes?

And who do we know who is lost, who needs a phone call to remind them they are still important to you and to God? Who needs a shepherd to lay that lamb on his shoulders and rejoice or a widow who worked all night so someone might see the light of day?

Newton's famous hymn is found in eight different languages in our Hymn Book . . . English, French, Cree, Mohawk, Ojibway, Inuktitut, Chinese and Japanese. This is because this lostness is not unique to us but touches the human Spirit. At times, we all wander off, we all get lost. But there is rejoicing when the lost is found, hope is restored and life is again worth the living.

*I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind but now I see.*

Biblical References

1 Timothy 5:1-10

Luke 15:1-10

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