Sunday, September 13, 1998
MYSTERIOUS MATHEMATICS
Luke 15:1-10

Philip Yancey, in his book I Was Just Wondering, writes in one chapter, “I do not know how to phrase this delicately, so I will just come out and say it: I’m worried about the mathematical aptitude shown in the Bible.” Frederick Buechner goes so far as to call it “atrocious.”

I agree with Yancey and Buechner. Here are a few examples. There’s that story Jesus told about a farmer who hires people to work in his fields. Some begin early in the morning, some at the coffee break, some at lunchtime, some at the afternoon coffee break, and some an hour before quitting time. Everyone is pleased to be employed because they need the money for food for their families. However, when they are all paid at the end of the day, those who have worked all day long are outraged to discover that those who worked only an hour, or three hours, or six hours get the same pay. The boss’s decision defies good economics.

I know that Jesus told this story as a lesson not on employee wages or benefits but on God’s attitude toward us. But the mathematics seem just as odd in the spiritual realm.

Then there’s that story about the thief on the cross who is being crucified alongside Jesus. He makes a “deathbed confession,” and Jesus tells him that he will join him in paradise. This man had not been baptized. He had never been a member of a church. He hadn’t accepted Jesus as his personal savior. Yet he is promised the same reward as someone who has lived a lifetime of devotion and piety.

How would you feel if you were raised in an upright Christian family, attended church regularly, and had established an exemplary home in the community, holding down a regular job, paying your bills on time, only to find some “Johnny-come-lately” with a deathbed confession is welcomed into heaven with more rejoicing than you received?

There’s also that story of the “forgiving father.” His one son asks for his inheritance and then goes off and spends all of it on “loose living,” as one translation puts it. He soon runs out of money and has to go to work or starve to death.

He gets a job on a pig farm and keeps at it long enough to observe that the pigs are getting a better deal than he is, and he decides to go home. On his return trip, he practices the speech he hopes will soften up his dad enough so that at least he won’t slam the door in his face: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Surely that will work.

However, his dad sees him coming from a distance and starts running toward him like a madman. Before the young man has time to get his first words spoken, his father throws his arms around him and welcomes him back.

The son is back. That’s all that matters. The lost has been found. Who cares why he’s back? And dad doesn’t do what any other father would have been inclined to do. He doesn’t say, “I hope you’ve learned your lesson” or “I told you so.” He doesn’t say, “I hope you’re finally ready to settle down for a while and will find some way to make it up to your mother.”

He only says, “Bring him something to eat. Bring some warm clothes to put on.” And then the dad calls all the household together with the neighbors for a big party.

Another example: one day, Jesus is standing near the offering box at the Temple. He watches people make their contributions. A widow puts two coins in the collection box, an amount worth a mere fraction of a penny. Jesus had also been watching rich people give sizeable amounts, yet he said, “I tell you the truth; this poor widow has put more into the collection box than all the others.” I hope he said it softly. It’s a case of mysterious mathematics.

Now consider the story about the shepherd who left his flock of 99 sheep and went to search for one lost sheep. He didn’t leave the 99 in the safety of the sheepfold but in the wilderness, where they could easily be stolen, wander off, or be attacked by predators. What foolishness. Suppose the shepherd returned with the one lost sheep only to discover that 24 others were now missing?

In the story of the lost coin, one coin out of ten is discovered to be missing, and the woman searches for it until she finds it. In both cases, the emphasis is on the value of the one sheep or coin that is missing. And when the lost is found, as in the story of the forgiving father and the returning son, a big party is held. The emphasis is not on how many lost have been found but the fact that even one who is lost is found. That’s good for us to hear today because we often worship numbers. Einstein said, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.” Another saying paraphrased from the Bible is: “What is popular is not always right. What is right is not always popular.”

The mysterious mathematics of the Bible remind me of a parable by Kierkegaard. He tells of an intruder who breaks into a department store at night and does not steal anything but rather rearranges all the price tags. The next day, the shopkeepers, not to mention the delighted customers, encounter such oddities as diamond necklaces on sale for a dollar and cheap costume jewelry earrings costing thousands. The gospel is like that, says Kierkegaard: it rearranges all our usual assumptions about worth and value.

When Jesus first told these stories about the lost being found, he was responding to criticism that was being leveled against him by the religious authorities of his time. The main point of his critics was that he was spending too much time seeking out and being with the “lost” people in that society — the sinners and the outcasts, people who were considered by many to be of less value than the church-going, stalwart citizens of the community.

The critics of Jesus assumed that some people in society are worthless. They are lost forever. It’s a waste of time and energy to go after them or try to save them or to be in any kind of relationship with them.

But that’s not the way the mathematics of God operates. God takes the initiative in seeking out the lost, and numbers are not the issue. Not only are the people who get lost accidentally through no fault of their own searched for, like the lost coin, but also those who wander off through carelessness or bad decisions, like the lost sheep.

As Jesus presented it, this is a radical new concept about the nature and love of God. God wants everyone who is lost to be found. God will seek and search forever if necessary. God even seeks out those who do not know they are lost.

From a practical, common-sense point of view, this searching love of God takes a lot of foolish risks. The shepherd was not a prudent individual. He did not play the percentages. He left the 99 sheep in the wilderness, unprotected, while he went to search for the one lost sheep.

This outrageous love of God is based on mysterious mathematics.

Now, let's make these stories more contemporary and ask: Who are the lost in our time? Who are the outcasts? Who among us are considered to have less value than others? Who are those who are pushed aside and forgotten? And what does this mean for the church?

People who are in jail or in prison are considered by many in our time to be lost forever. "Lock them up and throw away the key" is an attitude I hear voiced by many. "Who cares how crowded the jails and prisons are? The people in them are not of much value anyway."
On the good news side, there are many dedicated church members who take time to work as volunteers in various prison ministries. There are also those who are willing to work with inmates once they have been released so that they can become good citizens in our community. As Jesus said in one of his parables, "As you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me."

There are many children who are lost in today's world through no fault of their own. They are like the lost coin. Again, on the good news side, our First-Plymouth Preschool Discovery Days program seeks out many of these who are lost, and through tuition assistance and transportation, some of these children are found.

The letters we receive each week show that we are finding the lost through our television and radio ministry. The Bible stories tell us over and over again that God cares inordinately about the ones who aren't here. So we go right into their homes with the love of God. This interest in the absent may seem unreasonable to those of us who show up and keep the institutional church humming, but it is the gospel.

Here's one example from among the many letters I receive each week. I received it last week. This individual described himself or herself (the letter was not signed in person but with the initials A.R.T.L., which stands for "a radio and television listener") as an ugly duckling, as one who knows what it is to be an outcast and lost. Then he or she went on to say that through our media ministry, he considers himself to be found and expressed deep appreciation to me and to our church for our efforts in seeking out the lost.

As a church congregation, we seek out the lost through our support of Friendship Home, the People's City Mission, the Gathering Place, Daywatch, Habitat for Humanity, the Samaritan Counseling Center, and many other agencies in our community and beyond.
There are so many who are lost in today's world. Let's be personal for a moment. Is there anyone listening who has not felt lost at one time or another? Whether or not anyone else considered you to be lost, you felt lost within yourself. You felt disconnected, isolated, and alone, or you felt that your life had no direction, that you were simply going through the motions of living.

We can be lost in so many ways. Sometimes we are lost in the fog of fear, anxiety, and worry, and we hope that someone will try to find us. We can get lost in the jungles of passion, hatred, and vengeance, and then we are unable to see others as they are, and we only react in spasms of uncontrolled fury.

Sometimes we are lost in the depression of grief because of the illness or death of someone we love. There are those who are lost in an addiction to drugs or alcohol. And there are those who are lost because of defeat and disappointment.

There are also those who are lost in their ambition to get ahead. And some get lost just by wandering off. A farmer was looking for a lost cow. A city man asked him how it got lost. “They nibble themselves lost,” said the farmer. “They keep their heads down, wander from one grassy spot of pasture to another, come to a hole in the fence, and never can find the hole by which to get back in again.” I think that’s what happened to the lost sheep in the story Jesus told.

I know people who have gotten lost that way. They wander from one thing to another with no sense of direction and one day discover they have gotten way off course.

I’m proud of this congregation because of the way it works to seek out the lost. It is a church that is always reaching out beyond its own boundaries.

God came among us to save the lost — lost sheep, lost coins, lost sisters and brothers, lost drug addicts, lost weaklings, lost teenagers, and more. Jesus told these stories because his critics were not rejoicing but were grumbling and complaining because he was seeking the lost.

And that’s why the end of each of these stories is so important. When the shepherd found the lost sheep, he called all his friends together for a big party. He said, “Celebrate with me because I have found the one sheep that was lost.” So too the woman who found the lost coin. When she found it, she called all of her neighbors in and said, “Celebrate with me, for I have found the one coin that was lost.”

Then Jesus said, “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.” That’s the mysterious mathematics of God. The party is as big when one who is lost has been found as when one hundred who have been lost have been found.

Congregations like this one that are seeking and finding the lost are joyful places of celebration. That’s because when we seek out the lost, we too are found by God’s love. Remember, Jesus said, “Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives will find them.”

As far as God is concerned, the last word is not sinning — the last word is joy. The party begins and continues when the lost are found. When we work to seek out the lost, I hope you will join us in rejoicing instead of grumbling. Amen.