

The Arithmetic of God
3rd Sunday after Trinity
(From the Gospel: St. Luke xv. 1 ff.)

1 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes murmured , saying , This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. 3 And he spake this parable unto them, saying , 4 What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost , until he find it? 5 And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing . 6 And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost . 7 I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth , more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. 8 Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? 9 And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together , saying , Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost . 10 Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth .

In response to the contemptuous comments by the Pharisees about the company that Christ habitually kept, He offered them a class in what could be called divine math.

His enemies, driven by envy and fear, watched everything He did with that sort of hyper-critical scrutiny that characterizes people whose flimsy world, dependent upon their degree of control over others, is challenged in even the smallest way. As wicked as they were, they must have sensed the tremendous love and affection that Christ drew from the simple, lowly masses. This, plus the incontrovertible proof of His miracles, placed them on a condition of extreme alert.

The Pharisees were aghast that Christ's teaching drew the worst possible kind of crowd, and used this as evidence in their constant efforts to prove Him to be evil. To say *this man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them* was to present Jesus in the most negative terms. Since they themselves were learned men with "letters" (see Jn. 7:15), i.e., having studied with recognized theological authorities, they surely directed their own discourses only to "nice", carefully chosen groups, those who would affirm their every word, and applaud their cleverness.

But what a strange business this was with this Jesus of Nazareth! Not only was it clearly evident to all that *He taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes* (Matt. 7:29), but His message brought comfort, relief, and hope to His listeners. He was fulfilling the divine commission which He had quoted to members of His hometown synagogue at the commencement of His ministry:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

In today's discourse, Christ declares that God's priorities differ from those of men. He wastes His time, or so it seems, with the lost --let's call them "the losers"! He departs from the

successful, the well-appointed, the self-confident, to make a desperate search for those who, whether through circumstances beyond their control, or waywardness, or even incompetence, have wound up...*lost*. This is a group with which the Pharisees, and any other group of self-made and proud men, would never have identified themselves with. They would account such people as deserving the trouble they have gotten themselves into, or, perhaps, justly suffering divine judgment for some sin or “the sin of their fathers” (see Jn. 9:1-3).

Their approach to arithmetic led them to conclude that *ninety and nine just persons* are surely worth far more than *one sinner that repenteth*, and that searching the house for one lost coin is hardly better than cherishing the nine that one is sure one has. How could *one* of anything possibly be as important as many of the same? For them, it just didn't add up.

Isn't this utterly typical of this day of numbers that we live in? Our sights are set on the masses. Lone, single, boring ministry to spouses, to family members, to a friend in need, in obscure and unimportant settings where no real glory seems to be attached to it, is second, or even third best. Further, when we are at this business of catching fish for Christ, don't we prefer the better-looking, more recommendable and desirable ones...the “perfect” catch? The athlete, the famous actor, the successful businessman, are put forward as star converts, where very little attention is paid to that anonymous, obscure one who is known far better to Heaven than to men.

The Pharisees saw no value in the sort of people --*all the publicans and sinners*- who *drew near unto Christ for to hear him*. In their thinking, such people were worse than useless. They were irredeemable, beyond hope of recovery, and certainly were despised of God. So for Jesus to not only rise to the defense of those who arrived to sit in the front row, as it were, to hear Him, but to also present just one of these *that repenteth* as of greater value *than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance*, was past comprehension. Weren't they, after all, *just*? Hadn't they kept all of their lives carefully within the bounds of the Law, and never wandered?

The problem --and these conclusions must be read into Jesus' words, since He doesn't state it as such, at least here-- is that the *ninety and nine left in the wilderness* while the shepherd desperately hunted for the one lost sheep, are really not *just* at all. Pride has blinded them to the state of all men of all levels before God. We might imagine that even if such *sheep* had endured troubling, difficult circumstances for a season, the crisis was not sufficient to drive them to the Savior. They solved their problems --or so they thought-- without divine assistance, leaving them with nothing to thank God for.

It is also true of the lost silver coin. We might infer that the woman was careless who lost the coin. But “things happen”, don't they? The best-ordered among us is incapable of eliminating every factor that might challenge one's most carefully laid plans. Now God is certainly not “care-

less” in any way. He has never been swamped by details. He has never been overwhelmed by His task of ordering the universe, and watching and sustaining its every function. But there is one element in the picture that He refuses to govern by unopposable fiat, and that is Man, made in His image and in His likeness, to whom God has granted the incredible power of free will. And this is the sort of “coin” that is eminently capable of getting lost! The woman rejoices at the lost coin’s recovery, regardless of why it was lost. She is simply glad to see it again. There is no blame accorded either her or the coin. The glad reunion swallows up the awful past that had resulted in the separation of the one coin from the nine.

Jesus’ opponents were not at all happy with His math, nor could they understand it. It was Advanced Math, indeed! He makes more out of one lost sheep than *ninety and nine* who had remained within the fold, almost as if He was commending the lost sheep for having gotten lost. None of the *ninety and nine* had been *rejoiced over*. The woman who lost a silver piece *calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost*. It is obvious that the mere fact of the one coin being mislaid has vastly increased its worth in her eyes, even over the remaining nine she retained, which, after all, at “face value” were worth nine times more than the single coin.

But this is the way things are throughout the Kingdom of God. And just as governments alone are permitted to set and determine currencies (as is stipulated in the U.S. Constitution: : “To coin Money, regulate the Value thereof, and of foreign Coin, and fix the Standard of Weights and Measures” [Art. 1, Sect. 8]), so God assigns value as He will. And more often than not, it is by standards of measurement that are completely opposite to those of men.

The last line of today’s Gospel says it all: *I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth* . But we reply, “How could this be? What is the significance of one repenting sinner in a household of 3, or a town of 3000, or a city of 3,000,000, or a nation of 300,000,000?” But nowhere else throughout Scripture will you find a single thing that produces *joy in the presence of the angels of God* other, of course, than the arrival of God’s Son upon earth. Neither pyramids, nor civilizations, nor great feats of daring, nor scientific discoveries, nor the best in entertainment, nor any amount of human achievement, have accomplished such a thing. Where many men have often produced much grief, one repenting sinner alone brings joy to Heaven!

In an age geared in every possible fashion to bring as much joy to men as possible, in any form necessary to accomplish it, such a fact is very worthy of our notice.

One repenting sinner. Much joy in Heaven.

It is the Arithmetic of God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.