

Dunbarton Congregational Church  
Sunday, September 16, 2007  
10:30 a.m.

“Street Math”  
Luke 15:1-10

There once was a young man from Trinity,  
Who pondered the square root of infinity.  
While counting the digits,  
He developed the fidgets,  
Now he's given up math for divinity.  
~ Author Unknown

It was not until tenth grade that the limitations of my mathematical abilities were fully revealed. Knee deep in the abstractions of algebra, I lost my way and found arithmetic to be, in the words of Carl Sandburg, “where numbers fly like pigeons in and out of one’s head.” Since I had more pigeons flying out than in, I was assigned to what was embarrassingly called, “Slow Math.” Of course, it wasn’t the math that was slow, only the pace at which our lessons and our brains traveled. My teacher, Dr. Wienert, was a fast math person with a big heart. Indeed, he and my little group stayed together right through senior year. My boyfriend at the time was also a “fast math” person, on an engineering track and endlessly patient with my struggle to grasp the simplest geometrical equations or the most basic statistical concepts.

This should have left an indelible scar on my self-esteem but it didn’t because I discovered over the years that there is such a thing as “street math” that supercedes any “school math” we ever learned. “Street math” is math to live by. We’re *all* good at this. Street math says if something costs a lot of money, it is very valuable. Cost equals value, and no amount of deep discounting or common sense can budge us from this fact. The more we pay, the more something is inherently worth. Now street math is the opposite of esoteric; it is eminently practical. For example, it allows us to say, my car cost more than your car therefore I have a better car. My house cost more than your house thus I have a better house. My son’s school cost more than your son’s school therefore my son goes to a better school. I’m telling you even the most righteous among us is doing good old “yo mama” street math in one way or another every day. And discounted items? Get real; we only care about how big a percent the mark down is.

Street math also helps us determine what is expendable. The best example of this is time. Each day begins with twenty-four finite hours. Subtract ten for working, and two for commuting, and eight for sleeping, that leaves us four hours for kid care, home care, marriage care, family care, friend care, community care and church care, and approximately 1.25 minutes per day for *self* care. The magic thing about this equation is that the more time that is consumed by one thing, let's say work, the less time is awarded to each of the other variables: sleep, the kids, your home, marriage, family, friends and yourself and in just about in that order. Street math is proportional, it's all about fractions: 1/24, 2/24ths, etc.

This kind of math comes in handy when we consider the first two of the "lost" parables in Luke's gospel: the lost sheep and the lost coin (the third is the lost or prodigal son). One simply must do the math. One sheep out of ninety-nine does not warrant our time and effort. It's expendable. One coin out of ten is hardly worth a day's labor. It's expendable. This type of parable by the way is called a *similitude*, Jesus uses a common situation that everyone who is listening can relate to. Indeed, we've all lost things, and we've all applied the principles of street math to determine whether they're worth worrying about.

"Pure mathematics is, in its way, the poetry of logical ideas," writes Albert Einstein. So, you're not going to find me sweeping all day for a nickel, *but* a rare gold coin I bought at auction for \$5,000? I'd be on my knees with a magnifying glass! One lamb goes missing. Let's recite a little of Einstein's poetry: 100 lambs at \$100 per lamb that's \$10,000 worth of merchandise. I can't jeopardize \$9,900 for one wayward animal. This goes in the "cost of doing business" category, maybe there's even a tax deduction involved. *Unless of course* the lost lamb was a very rare breed and worth ten times that of the others, maybe then we'd take a look.

If all this sounds cynical, please remember those Pharisees who are complaining that Jesus spends far too much time with tax collectors and sinners. If righteousness were a commodity, they are asking Jesus why he wastes his time on that which has no worth. It's simply street math, the same kind we apply to our lives today.

Jesus, of course, turns this logic on its head. The shepherd goes after the lost sheep then goes home, not even back to the flock, to celebrate. The woman searches for the one coin then invites her friends in to celebrate her recovery of it. And what do we do? We say, of course, the meaning of the parable is obvious, then go right on making decisions the "street math" way.

Woe to those who make Jesus so simple.

In all of the parables of Jesus there are morals to be sure, but the real purpose is to reveal to his listeners the true nature of God. Both God the shepherd and God the woman are “finders,” they seek out and retrieve that which is lost. It is their nature to do so, just as it is God’s nature to seek us out when *we* are lost, when this “street math” culture of ours devalues what we really care about and strips us of the time to spend doing the things that we *know* matter. Maybe we’re lost in our faith, maybe it’s a relationship that has failed to bear fruit, or a child that’s gone astray, or a loved one whose health has failed, or a job that’s a dead end. We feel lost and wonder, or maybe we don’t wonder, “Where are you God?”

You see here is another way of looking at the story: we don’t need to ask for help, we don’t even have to know that we need help, God is already seeking us out because that is what God does, God finds that which is lost and that means us. Is there anyone here today who is not struggling in some sense, carrying some kind of burden, some kind of worry in your heart? Maybe you are hidden in the dusty corner of an overworked life, concealed by your busyness until your real concerns are perfectly camouflaged. Perhaps you have wandered off the path and into what feels like treacherous territory—a thicket of financial distress, a carnivorous addiction, or maybe just the loneliness of too much righteousness, the illusion that you are different from, better than everyone else, when it comes to morality and charity.

Take heart. One day you will spy a beam of light shining through the haze of one of your busy days. Someone will stop and pick you up and shine you up and call in all her friends to celebrate your very being. And you won’t have a choice but to be found and appreciated.

Take heart. One day someone will tread up a hill and spy you in a thicket, someone will chase away your demons and carry you across his shoulders back to his home where he will celebrate the fact that you are safe. It will happen, my friends, God always comes, not *even* but *especially* in times of disaster. The question is, will you recognize your own salvation when God finds you? And then, will you change your life because of it?

Not even Dr. Wienert could have taught me and my slow-math-mates this kind of logic: that *one* is not only greater than *ten* but *ninety-nine*. That the 1 hour of my week that I spend in church is of equal value to the remaining 167 hours because that is when I get to thank God for seeking me out, faults and all, not because I asked, but because this is what God does, this is the extent of God’s love for me and for you.

You don't feel it, you say, this thing called God's boundless love? Let's go back to the old fashioned math: one slice of daily bread plus an infinity of forgiveness, zero debts and zero debtors, zero temptations and zero evil add up to God's glorious kingdom. Look around. Look within. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. *You have already been found. You have already been shown the way.* Jesus just thought you needed a little reminding.

Amen