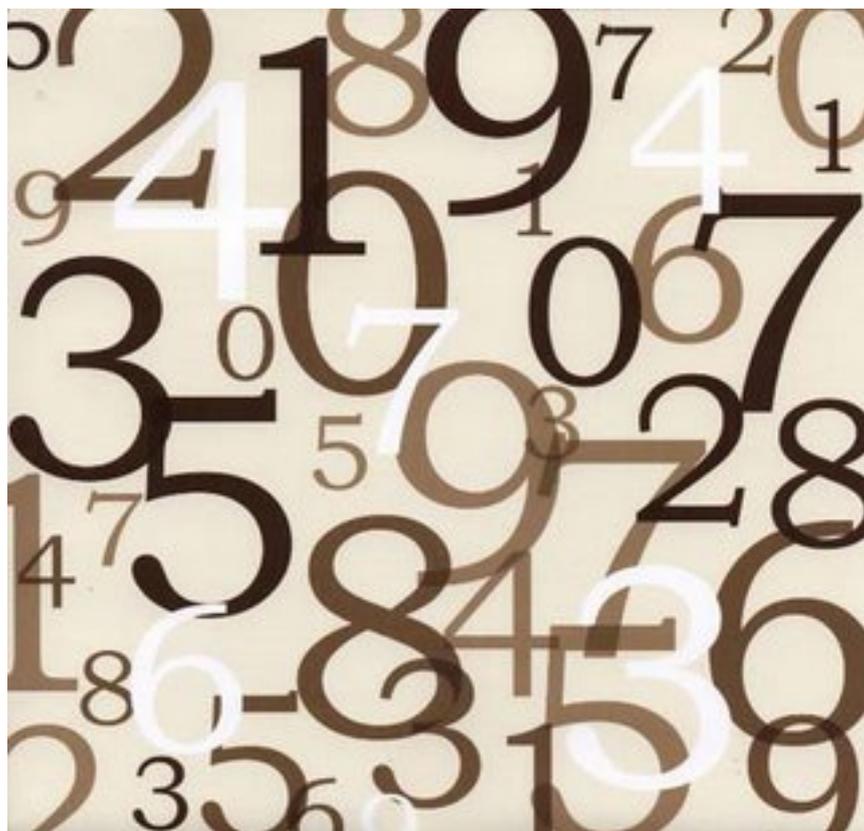


The Preciousness and Joy of a Whole Number



This hasn't always been the case. In biblical times, they attached a lot of meaning to certain numbers. For example, in the bible, the numbers forty, ten, twelve, and one hundred are highly symbolic. The number forty, for instance, speaks of the length of time required before something can come to proper fruition, while the numbers ten, twelve, and one hundred speak of a certain wholeness that is required to properly appropriate grace.

Knowing that the ancients invested special meaning in certain numbers is critical to understanding a very challenging, and neglected, story in the Gospels, namely, the parable of the woman with the ten coins (Luke 15, 8-10). Without grasping the symbolism of the numbers, this parable loses its meaning.

Here is the parable as Scripture gives it: A woman had ten coins and lost one. She became extremely anxious and agitated about the loss and began to search frantically and relentlessly for the lost coin, lighting lamps, looking under tables, and sweeping all the floors in her house. Eventually she found the coin and her joy in finding it matched her agitation in losing it. She was delirious with joy, called together her neighbors to share in her joy, and threw a party whose cost far exceeded the value of the coin she had lost.

Why such anxiety and such joy over the loss a coin and the finding of a coin whose value was that of a dime? The answer lies in the symbolism of numbers: In her culture, nine was not a whole number; ten was a whole number. Both the woman's anxiety on losing the coin and her joy in finding it have little to do with the value of the coin. They have to do with the value of wholeness. A certain wholeness in her life had been fractured and only by finding the coin could it be restored. In essence, this is the

parable:

A woman had ten children and these constituted her family. With nine of them, she had a good relationship, but one of her daughters was alienated from her and from the family. Everyone else came regularly to the family table, but this one daughter did not. The woman couldn't find rest in that situation; she needed her alienated daughter to rejoin them. She tried every means to reconcile with her daughter and, one day, in a miracle of miracles, it worked. Her daughter reconciled with her and came back to the family. The family was whole again, everyone was back at table. The woman was overjoyed, withdrew her modest savings from the bank, and threw a lavish party to celebrate the great grace that her family was whole again.

There's an important lesson here: Like that woman, we are meant to be anxious, not able to rest, lighting lamps and searching, until our families, churches, and communities are again whole and those who will no longer sit at a table with us are back in the fold. Nine is not a whole number ... and neither is the number of those who are normally at our family or Eucharistic tables. We need to be constantly uneasy: Who is not at table with us? Who no longer goes to church with us? Who feels uncomfortable worshipping with us? Who will no longer join us in a conversation over morality or politics? And, most importantly, are we comfortable with the fact that so many people can no longer join us at our family, Eucharistic, moral, or political tables?

Sadly, today, too many of us are comfortable in families, churches, and communities that are far, far from whole. Sometimes, in our less reflective moments, we even rejoice in it: "Good riddance! Love us or leave us! She wasn't a real Catholic in any case! His views are so narrow and bigoted it's just as well he isn't here! We are better off without that kind! There's more peace this way! We are a purer, more faithful, family or church because of her absence!"

But it's this attitude and lack of healthy solicitude for wholeness that, perhaps more than any other thing, explains the joylessness and hardness that is so evident everywhere today in our families, churches, and political circles. Unlike Jesus, whose heart ached with God's universal salvific will and who prayed in tears for those "other sheep who are not of this fold", and unlike the woman who lost one of her coins and would not sleep until every corner of the house was turned upside down in a frantic search for what was lost, we content ourselves with just nine coins, an incomplete set, instead of setting out solicitously in search of that lost wholeness that would again bring us completeness and joy.

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