

GOD'S LOUSY MATH
OCTOBER 20, 1985

JOHN 6:1-13

MARK 6:30-44

I remember the times my brother tried to learn his multiplication tables; or rather I should say, I remember the times my mother tried to teach him the multiplication tables! My brother is four years younger than I so I suppose I enjoyed watching the production. He would cry, throw a temper tantrum, and roll on the floor. I don't know how he is in math today; but, to you who have difficulty with math, cheer up! God too has difficulty with math. In fact, Jesus is lousy at math.

For example, how much is $1 + 1$? We amateur mathematicians probably answer: 2. But, Jesus said when you take one woman and one man, put them together in marriage, you end up with one. $1 + 1 = 1$. That is God's lousy math. In our lesson today, Jesus took 5 loaves and 2 fish and multiplied them. What do you get when you multiply 5×2 ? Jesus didn't get 10 for an answer, he got 5,000. Jesus fed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Matthew says there were women and children in addition to 5,000 men. However many there were, there was a crowd!

The crowd had followed Jesus and his disciples. They were excited about his teachings and his healings. Something was stirring, something new was happening, perhaps this was the Messiah for whom they were all waiting. So the crowds followed Jesus. Jesus, however, was tired. He wanted to rest. Even Jesus had to have time for himself, but they followed him. When it came time to eat the evening meal, the disciples said to Jesus, "Send them away so they can get somewhere where there is food." But, Jesus said, "You feed them." The disciples counted their money and knew they did not have enough to feed such a multitude. So Jesus said, "Bring what food you have." Andrew came with a small boy, "Here is a boy with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that between so many? They will certainly not be enough for all these people."

WHAT IS THAT BETWEEN SO MANY? Andrew's incredulity is the sign of a mathematician. Evidently he was good at math for he knew that 5 loaves and 2 fish do not multiply to 5,000! What is that between so many? Many say, "What I can do seems so insignificant. My little contribution is so small. What is one contribution between so many? I can do so little. What difference does my small contribution make? Why should I vote? What is one vote between so many?" Have you heard comments like that?

I also hear comments like, "Why pray for healing? What is one prayer? What can I do about world hunger? What can my small contribution and concern do about a problem as large and complex as world hunger? What can I do about world peace? What is one concern between so many?" Can a few persons take on the United States government and provide sanctuary for refugees? How can just a few influence the government?

The problems are vast. The problems are complex. Sanctuary for political refugees, war, environment, hunger, exploitation and oppression of people. These are gigantic problems, and we amateur mathematicians doubt our power and influence. Even in our own church, we have people who say, "The

church doesn't need me. There are many people far more capable than I in our church. I'm not needed. What can I offer?" But, GOD IS LOUSY AT MATH!

LOOK AT HOW GOD MULTIPLIES! Jesus asked all the people to sit in groups on the ground. Then he took the 5 loaves and 2 fish, gave thanks to God for them, broke the loaves and handed them to the disciples to distribute. Each person received enough bread and fish to eat all he/she wanted. Then Jesus told them to gather up the leftovers, and the leftovers were enough to fill 12 baskets. $5 \times 2 = 5,000$ plus 12 baskets. Now, that is math!

In Mark 4:30-32, Jesus taught:

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which at the time of sowing in the soil is the smallest of all seeds on earth; yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.

Imagine how God multiplies! God takes the smallest of all seeds and transforms it into a motel for birds. Think what God can do with your life. God can multiply and transform you into a person who can do far more than you can imagine. Look how God can transform an ugly caterpillar into a magnificent, colorful, free-flying butterfly! Have you ever seen such multiplication!

Isn't it a miracle how a result is greater than the sum of its parts? You can dissect the human body and understand each of the parts; yet, when the parts are put together, the body is greater than the sum of its parts. Imagine what God can do with all of us together as the church! Combine us with our uniqueness, doing our most for God, and the results will be far greater than what we can do by ourselves. This church could be a power for good in this community far beyond our wildest imagination. Why? Because God is lousy at math. Our hope for the future is in God's lousy math. God can transform this world with all its problems into the kingdom of God. Our hope is in the eventual triumph of God's reign which mystifies all of us who are so mathematical and logical. How does God do it?

THE BOY GAVE HIS ALL. Jesus was able to multiply because one boy gave his all. The small boy must have been the only one there who had a lunch. Or, he was the only one there who was willing to share his lunch. Actually, the boy was willing to do more than share his lunch. He was willing to give it to Jesus because Jesus asked for it. When I have told this story in Sunday School classes or in Vacation Church School, I have asked the boys and girls how many of them would give their lunches away. Most of them said they wouldn't. They are logical and mathematical. We have taught them well.

After all, take one lunch, give it away, what do you have? $1 - 1 =$ what? Nothing, says math. So, of course, the children are right. $1 - 1 = 0$. That's the trouble, isn't it. We look at the world through the eyes of mathematics. We look at the call of God through the eyes of mathematics. But, God is lousy at math. Take one lunch, give it to God, and 5,000 are fed, including you. Your own needs have been met and countless others have been blessed.

I learned this truth years ago. When I was eighteen years old and a sophomore at Hamline University in St. Paul, the District Superintendent

appointed me to serve two rural Methodist churches as the minister. At one point a neighboring church offered a series of leadership training classes for Sunday School teachers, so on Wednesday evenings I would drive the 80-mile round trip, pick up teachers from my churches, take them to the class, deliver them back to their homes, and then return to college. I remember well the Wednesday I discovered that I had only enough money to purchase gasoline for the round trip or eat meals on Thursday and Friday. I struggled with myself all day. What shall I do? Call up the teachers and tell them I couldn't come? Or, buy the gasoline and not eat on Thursday and Friday? After all, it is logical mathematically that if you spend your money on gasoline then there will be no money for food. Right? That's logical. But, God is lousy at math.

I talked to myself on Wednesday, finally concluding with, "I made a commitment. I promised the teachers I would support them in the effort to get training." So I put the last of my money into gasoline and drove out to the country. On the way home, as I delivered the teachers to their homes, the last woman out of the car said, "Here's something to help with the gas," and she handed me a dollar bill. I feasted for two days on that dollar! Ironically, the woman who gave me the dollar was the poorest of the group. She had the most children, and I knew that life was a struggle for that family. But, because she knew what money meant, she knew that a struggling college student probably needed financial encouragement from time to time.

The work of God rarely depends solely on gifts from the wealthy. God takes even the smallest offerings and multiplies them. God takes the gifts of those who are willing to give their all, like the boy with the loaves and fish, and multiplies them far beyond their worth. The result is greater than the sum of the parts. Because God is lousy at math, my teachers were able to get their training, and I was able to eat!

When it comes to giving, whose mathematics do you trust? Do you trust the mathematics that teaches if you give, then there will be less for yourself, for it is logical that $1 - 1 = 0$? Or, do you trust God's lousy math that teaches if you give, your own needs will be met and God's work will prosper, because in God's math, $1 - 1 = 5,000$? God's math works because you are not actually giving anything away, for it was not yours in the first place. All that you have--money, resources, talents, abilities--has been entrusted to you so that God's work will prosper. You have not been blessed for your own enjoyment or enrichment. You have been blessed so that you may do God's work. God's math works because God is working out his plan in which you are a necessary ingredient.

Does God expect you to give your all, as did the boy who gave his loaves and fish? Sometimes Jesus asks for everything. He once told a rich, young ruler to give away all his possessions to the poor and then come and follow Jesus. Sometimes Jesus asks people to sell, move to a foreign place and serve in mission. Most of the time, God asks his people to invest, expand and manage the resources God has given. Then God asks for 10% to do his work and lets you keep the remaining 90% for your own needs. This biblical plan is called the tithe.

By tithing--giving 10% of your wealth back to God who owns it in the first place--you are fulfilling your part of God's plan. God blesses and multiplies the remaining 90% so that your needs are met. When you do not

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tithe, you are trying to live your life according to modern math rather than God's math. When you do not tithe, you are keeping too much for yourself and probably finding yourself "short." Tithers will tell you how they miraculously have enough. The work of God is accomplished and you still get to eat.

Some may find it difficult suddenly to change their living habits and give a tithe. If so, why not commit yourself to a plan where each year you increase your giving by 1% of your income until you reach the tithe? For example, if your income is \$4,000 per month, 1% is \$40. Increase your giving then by \$40 per month, until you can reach the tithe of \$400 per month. Some discover such a rewarding relationship with God that they give beyond the tithe. They really believe in God's lousy math.

In God's math, you count. What you do counts far beyond what you may think for God multiplies like you wouldn't believe. What you give is important for God multiplies it so that his work is supported. When you give your all, as did the young boy, astounding things will happen. When we together give God our all, what a church God will create, for the results are greater than the sum of the parts. For in God's math, $5 \times 2 = 5,000$ plus twelve baskets of leftovers.