

A while back, I talked with a group of teenagers about the difference between human arithmetic and God's arithmetic. Raise your hand if you know the answer to this human math question: one apple plus one apple equals \_\_ (two apples) \_\_.

In human arithmetic, both sides of the equation must be balanced. An equal sign indicates that there are equivalent amounts on either side. As you change the total on one end, so must the other end change in the same proportion.

(Marie + Krispy Kreme doughnut) = (happy priest + yummy goodness)

Not so with God's arithmetic. Because in God's math, a heapin' helpin' of grace always transforms the equation. Bumper stickers and social media memes proclaim that love is love. Not so in God's math: because God blesses and hallows mutual affection and support.

(Love = love + grace)

God's arithmetic wreaks havoc with our rational thinking. Here's a trick question – who can answer it?

one Christian + one Christian = \_\_\_ (*two Christians plus Christ*) \_\_\_

“Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them.”<sup>1</sup>

But what about sin, you might be wondering.

In our math, a person + sin = a person + sin. But add a dose of repentance? Contrary to what you might think, the introduction of the repentance variable doesn't cancel out the sin.

Person + sin + repentance **will never** = zero.

(A person + sin + repentance) will always = (a redeemed person + grace). Because there is a powerful God factor at play that works outside our reason.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:20

God's math is beyond our reckoning; when we invite God into the equation of our lives, our value in God's eyes will always be far more than the sum of our parts.

This is what I see playing out in this morning's Gospel lesson. Jesus sees beyond the news reports of the day to deeper spiritual questions that his followers are wrestling with. Did bad things happen to these people because of their sin?

It's a question I think most of us have wondered: is it possible that I did something so cosmically wrong that this bad thing in my life is the result? Did I get this disease because I offended God? Is this challenge I'm facing the result of divine retribution?

We ask these questions because in our reality, according to our math, that is the only explanation for the deeper question *why me?* We assume that the suffering we bear must be the result of a major offense against God ... what else accounts for what we perceive as a negative balance in our lives?

Except that this is bad theology. This line of reasoning is contrary to Gospel Truth. God does not punish us like this because God is a God of grace.

Even way back in the Garden of Eden creation myth, the punishment for eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was death.<sup>2</sup> Except grace intervened. Adam and Eve ate of the tree and annihilation was not the result because of God's grace.

There are many, many other examples in Scripture of grace intervening and rebalancing the scales. Take Jacob, for instance. He's a hot mess up one side and down the other. He's a guy who may objectively deserve divine retribution – he lies, cheats, steals his brother's birthright ... And God loves him anyway, and eventually graces him with a legacy that is far greater than anything he could possibly have done to deserve or earn.

Speaking of Israel, the Israelites, the chosen people of God again and **again** betrayed God by moaning and complaining, worshipping false idols, engaging in bad behavior, and yet God's grace intervened time and time again.

Our God is a God of second chances. And third chances. And seventy-fourth and six hundred fifth chances. We need those do-overs because that's who we are.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:17

And God grants them, because that's who and what God is. God is the God of second chances. God is the Giver of Do-Overs. God is the bestower of grace.

The fig tree in our parable isn't faring too well. Any objective observer can see that the equation seems way off balance – valuable space is taken up and no produce comes forth. Yet grace abounds. Potential is recognized. The one who tends this tree loves it dearly. Did the fig tree do something to offend God? Is there a moral imperative that it be cut down because it is barren? Perhaps the tree is apathetic and doesn't really care to expend the energy needed to grow and produce good fruit. The parable makes us ask ourselves, would its destruction balance the cosmic scales? And so the gardener objects to cutting it down. The gardener loves this tree and nourishes it with what it needs, and does everything possible for it to thrive. Give it another chance, he pleads.

The gardener in this parable reformulates the equation. An unproductive tree no longer equals wasted space and effort. The gardener understands that this tree holds promise. And so unearned and undeserved hope is invested; unearned and undeserved effort is expended; and the gardener waits. God's arithmetic is slowly and deliberately being worked out.

We aren't told how the story plays out. I believe it's quite intentional that Jesus leaves the ending for our imaginations to reconcile.

Jesus teaches us a new math, a new way of understanding cosmic balance and equilibrium. He tells the cynics that no, tragedy and hardship and suffering and pain are not the result of God's judgement and wrath for wrongdoing. He points us toward the variables of grace and mercy by embodying them in his personhood, in his gentle instruction and firm calls for repentance, in his willingness to bear the punishment we each deserve.

Sin is not equated with suffering or hardship. Suffering and hardship are just part of the human experience.

Sin = turning from God

But sin overcome through repentance leads to light and life and grace and peace.

(A person + sin + repentance) will always = (a redeemed person + grace).

This is holy reconciliation – the very purpose and function of God's arithmetic.

Jesus implores us to choose to do the work of holy reconciliation. Choose life. Choose hope. Choose joy. Choose love. Because grace abounds.

The Good News is that we are constantly being invited to add the God variable into the equation of our lives. Grace is there. It's everywhere. *It is*, Jesus says, because I AM.