

Jesus' New Math
Sermon on John 6:1-15 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, July 30, 2006

It turns out that the New Math isn't as new as I thought. We might even describe New Math as being "of a certain age." The "old math" focused on learning through developing skills such as memorizing the multiplication tables or performing long division. The New Math incorporates ideas like the use of sets and the teaching of understanding by going into mathematical theory.¹ New Math emphasizes mathematical structure through abstract concepts like set theory and number bases other than 10. In the introduction to his song "New Math," Tom Lehrer summarized New Math by saying, "...in the new approach, as you know, the important thing is to understand what you're doing, rather than to get the right answer."²

But educational trends, like fashion, come and go, and the New Math has been replaced by ideas like whole math and the new, new math. Both of these schools of thought focus on getting students to approach math through problem solving and team work. Critics of the new, new math complain that like the old, new math, students are not expected to master the basics of mathematical operations, but simply to be creative in their approach to finding a solution.

Jesus might well be accused of practicing the new math. After he had been hard at work teaching and healing the crowds with his disciples, and after his failed attempt to take them on a retreat, Jesus gets into a boat and with his disciples heads for the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. If this is another attempt at a vacation, it, too, fails, for once Jesus had gone "up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples" (Jn. 6:3), he "looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him" (6:5). The crowd continues to follow Jesus on account of the fact that they "saw the signs that he was doing for the sick" (6:2).

¹ Zalman Usiskin, "Stages of Change" 1999 LSC PI Meeting Keynote Address at http://lsc-net.terc.edu/do.cfm/conference_material/6857/show/use_set-oth_pres

² "The New Math" in Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Math.

But this is no place for a crowd, especially for one that included women and children. As Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh note, “Since the areas outside towns and villages were considered chaotic and uncontrolled by humans,... they were believed to be inhabited by various spirits or demons.”³ Thus (and this shows that even religious studies scholars can have a sense of humor), “People did not picnic (or do recreational swimming or go mountain climbing) in the first-century Mediterranean world.”⁴ The people follow Jesus even out to this inhospitable place because they have needs: hungry children, sick spouses, friends possessed by demons, family members who are blind or lame or deaf. There was no escaping the needy crowd because need doesn’t take a holiday. Neither illness nor death is a respecter of seasons. Heartache and loss don’t read the calendar. People lose jobs and relationships and hope regardless of the time of year.

So when Jesus looked up from his conversation with his disciples and saw the crowd he was not surprised. He knew why they had come and he knew what he was going to do. People have always come to Jesus with the same needs, and Jesus has always responded to those needs with the same love and compassion and kindness. But the approach of the crowd presented an opportunity to see what the disciples of Jesus—those who had followed him and learned from him and sought to be like him—would do.

Thus Jesus turned to Philip and asked him, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” (6:5). It is not a question asked out of ignorance. Of course, Jesus knows exactly what he’s going to do, so he posed the question “to test” Philip. Elsewhere in the Gospels, and particularly in the account of Jesus’ temptation, the verb “to test” has the negative sense of tempting or trying someone. Here, Jesus is in complete control of the situation, and he wants to

³ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 126.

⁴ *Ibid.*

test the extent or degree of Philip's faith. Where in the world would they get enough bread to feed all these people?

Though Philip may not have majored in economics, neither was he a dummy. Using the old math, the kind that emphasizes basic skills such as memorizing the multiplication tables and being able to perform long division, Philip quickly ran the figures in his head. "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of [these people] to get a little," he said (6:7). I am embarrassed to admit it, but I failed more than one math test in my school career, and sadly Philip, rather like me, fails this particular test. And I suspect that Philip and I are not alone. Rather than seeing the possibilities, rather than offering to get involved, Philip says even with what little they could cobble together, the situation would still be impossible. How often, when faced with a faith test, do we answer, "Impossible!" Establish peace in the Middle East or Iraq? Impossible. Expect that hunger, poverty, and disease will be eliminated in our lifetimes? Impossible. Believe that the gang banger, the drug addict, the violent criminal can be saved? Impossible. The old math that says " $2 + 2 = \text{more than } 4$? Impossible!" is not Jesus' math.

Then Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, seeing that the old math hasn't worked, tries new math—the new math that takes the approach of solving problems through teamwork. Andrew tells Jesus, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" (6:9). The new math approach has the virtue of seeing possibility: The five loaves and two fish are at least a starting point. But Andrew, like Philip, knows the first law of economics, which is that resources are scarce. Simply put, "The problem is that although wants [and needs] are virtually without limits, resources ... available to produce goods and services [to meet those wants and needs] are limited in their supply."⁵

⁵ Economics: Scarcity at <http://www.thereference.com/econ/scarcity.html>.

Five small loaves and two little fish is an absurdly small amount of food with which to feed a crowd. Even if they were cut in tiny pieces, pickled fish sandwiches aren't going to go very far at all. How often, when faced with a situation that presents seemingly insurmountable odds, do we look at the available resources and say it's not enough? How often does Jesus call us to be his disciples, and all we can see is our inadequacy? I can't teach Sunday school—I don't know enough about the Bible. I can't go on a mission trip—I don't have enough training. I can't pray or attend Bible study or serve at a homeless shelter—I don't have enough time. Even the new math, the math that says "Working together, we can solve any problem" comes up short. "You + me + our available resources" still won't address humanity's most vexing problems.

Perhaps our problem, like that of the disciples, is our approach. Too often we approach matters of faith like they were algebra problems: simplify operations, eliminate variables and solve for x . Both Philip and Andrew interpret the question of feeding a hungry crowd "on the most conventional level and so give conventional answers: There is neither money nor food enough to feed so many people."⁶ Which ought to tell us we need to switch disciplines: We need to leave behind the math and the science and the economics and embrace Jesus' new math, the math of faith. Gail O'Day says, "[T]he disciples' answers show how traditional categories cannot comprehend in advance what Jesus has to give. Conventional expectations offer no solutions to the crowd's needs; Jesus alone knows how to meet those needs."⁷

Jesus alone—not science or economics or politics or philosophy—knows how to meet our needs because he shares a unique relationship with God. Jesus knows our needs because he knows and works with and serves the God who created us so intimately, for he is indeed one with this God. Jesus was at work with God in the beginning, and "All things came into being

⁶ Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, New Interpreters Bible IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 594.

⁷ Ibid.

through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (1:3). Ultimately of course, Jesus himself “became flesh and lived among us” (1:14) as one of us, knowing our hunger and thirst and pain and weakness as his own. And having died our death and been raised to the right hand of God, Jesus did not leave us without a comforter or guide, but continues to provide for us through the Holy Spirit.

This, then, is Jesus’ new math, the math of a God who knows our needs in a world whose reality is scarcity. The power and goodness and grace and glory of God is that in the hands of Jesus, division becomes multiplication: a little becomes a lot and fragments become a feast. In the hands of Jesus a half-empty lunch pail becomes a meal for more than 5000 people with twelve baskets full of leftovers. In the hands of Jesus, what is impossible becomes possible, what is hardly enough becomes more than sufficient. When we bring ourselves and our lives to Jesus, he gives thanks and lifts them up to God, and does things we would never expect. He creates and makes new, adding hope and multiplying joy in our lives. That’s Jesus’ new math.