

## “New Math”

Matthew 20:1-16

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<sup>1</sup>“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup>They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Prayer.

If the world could have been saved by good bookkeeping,  
it would have been saved by Moses,  
not Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

From the time of the abacus  
Archimedes and Pythagoras  
to Pascal and Fibonacci  
not much has changed.  
Mathematics is a constant waiting to be uncovered  
a variable that only needs to be solved  
a set of rules established  
at the beginning of time  
to be followed for a predictable outcome,

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<sup>1</sup> Capon, Robert Farrar.

a linear process designed  
to describe a non-linear world.

Thirty years ago  
the curriculum was straightforward:  
algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and precalculus.  
“New math” was a term  
used by hippies and home schoolers.  
It received our scowls and scorn  
as if it were an excuse for  
not being able to keep up.

We raise our children  
only to find out that “New math” is mainstream.  
Integration appears to only rearrange the furniture  
to give the old math a new coat of paint  
to make curriculum changes  
for the sake of change  
and to label it “progress.”

Yet one plus one  
still add up to two.  
Our confidence remains unshakable.  
“What a shame,” we muse  
“if only the waiter had paid attention in class  
he would know the difference between  
fifteen and twenty percent.”  
And we pocket the extra dollar fifty.

The Gospel gives us a rude awakening.  
St. Matthew throws cold water into a not-yet-awake-face.  
Jesus turns the mathematic world on its head  
and all the change drops out of  
Pythagoras' pockets.

Jesus assaults our mathematical prowess:  
Balance the scale with two brothers  
one who talks the talk but fails to walk the walk

with another who has a smart mouth  
and a conscience that causes him to follow through in the end.  
Which causes the scale to tip in his favor? Jesus asks.  
The right answer is followed by a stinging rebuke  
“Tax collectors and prostitutes  
are going to heaven ahead of you.”  
You thought you were number one in His Kingdom?  
Go to the end of the line.  
The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Jesus' math is new math, and it assaults  
our view of the world:  
Gobs of money  
bags and bags of money  
are lugged up the steps  
and pulled across the floor  
to be hoisted into the Temple Treasury.  
Jesus balances gobs of money  
on a scale  
with a simple widow  
who isn't worthy of notice  
who puts a single penny into the box.  
Let us think: bags of money vs. one penny.  
Which way do the scales tip?  
Wrong again!  
The new math of the Kingdom  
becomes the order of the day  
when Jesus reports  
the value of a penny exceeds the value of  
a king's ransom.

The new math of the Gospel  
assaults our sense of the rational.  
A hundred sheep,  
and one gets itself lost.  
Leave the 99 behind and go looking for  
Darwin's poster-child?  
Are you kidding?

What kind of new math is that?  
Save one,  
but return and find that wolves  
have devoured half of the other 99!  
“Jesus,” we complain,  
“perhaps it is time for you to repeat ninth grade.”  
The Gospel thanks us for our concern,  
then Jesus tells us to get going  
and find the one sheep who is lost.

Jesus' math is new math,  
and it is an invitation  
to move beyond science and engineering  
to look at the world a little differently  
to see the face of His children through His eyes:  
In His kingdom  
one may be equal in value to 99  
a penny may be of greater worth than a sack of money  
the smart-alloc ADHD son has more going for him than  
the insincere honors child.

As we prepare our budgets for 06  
balance income and expenses  
on the scales of “generally accepted accounting principles”  
apply the associative property to add up the subtotals  
our conservative tabulations are assaulted-  
we have before us **Jesus' new math**.  
A day's work is as valuable as an hour's work.  
Twelve hours under a hot sun  
equals the last minute hire.

“What kind of math are you working?”  
Thanks for your application  
to the Simon Graduate School of Business Administration,  
but have a nice life.  
Jesus draws a line in the sand  
and dares us to cross it.  
“Whose Point of View will you accept?” He asks.

“And whose will you reject?”

Come down out of the ivory castle you live in  
of 60 hour work weeks  
of Type A drivenness  
of objectives, goals, and achievements  
of resumes, degrees, and experience.  
Get into the line of day laborers  
of individuals who are so desperate  
to put food on the table  
that they are suckered by a promise from a suicide bomber in a van.  
Get into the line of day laborers  
picked over  
left behind  
because you were not the strongest, the most fit, or the best looking.  
Get into the line of day laborers  
rejected all day long  
because of a physical disability,  
a lack of training,  
you're too old,  
or because you don't have a green card.  
Rejected, despised, and left to starve  
until the eleventh hour  
when you are claimed.  
By God's hand the Kingdom is complete  
and the reward is extravagant.

“Get yourself into that line!” Jesus challenges us today.  
There is a new sheriff in town  
a new chair of the mathematics department.  
Pascal and Pythagoras have been replaced.  
This is God's Kingdom  
and the only math that will count is God's new math,  
and don't you forget it!

We say we want to live in a world  
where one plus one equals two.  
Yet it appears that God has created the world

in such a way  
that God is free to be extravagant.<sup>2</sup>

Small insignificant numbers  
like one penny  
like one sheep  
like one left behind all day long  
become very large in God's mathematics.  
God is willing to risk everything  
just for one.  
God sent his son  
just for you.  
God is willing to risk everything  
just for you.

God's ways are not  
our ways.  
Neither is God's math  
our math.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Willimon, William H., Pulpit Resources, September 18, 2005.