God is Terrible at Math

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
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Luke 15

15Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'
3 So he told them this parable: [4'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." 7Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

8 'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.']

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

11 Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " 20So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

[21]Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." [22]But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. [23]And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; [24]for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

[25] 'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. [26]He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. [27]He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." [28]Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. [29]But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. [30]But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" [31]Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32]But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." '

Sermon

We think of God as omnipresent, all knowing, ultimately wise. In ways we cannot comprehend, we know God has always been, is and is to come. Julian of Norwich could imagine God within a tiny hazelnut - and poets and psalmists see God in all the far flung galaxies. God can do all things.

And yet, our parable this morning tells us something God isn't good at.

God, portrayed as the father in this story, is terrible at math.

At least, God is terrible at *human* math.

My mom was great at math. Good enough to skip a grade, good enough to have a career dependent upon math. Good enough to tackle the toughest equations. When I struggled with math she told me this story, which in turn I told to Zac and friends in their elementary math lunch bunch.

On one of the first few days of class, Mom's high school math teacher had written an unsolved equation on the blackboard. He said, any student who solves this problem will be guaranteed a B for the term. Mom went home, sat down at the desk and started to

work. She worked for hours. Dark came and went; supper came and went. The solution would not come. Her mother finally came in and told her to go to bed. She turned off the lamp and crawled under the covers and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night she woke up! The solution had come to her in a dream. She turned on the lamp long enough to write the answer down, and went back to sleep. When she brought the answer to the teacher the next day, he did not believe she'd actually solved it. You figured out the answer was in the back of the textbook, he accused. No, she said, I worked it through myself. Well then, he said, I'm sure you'll be able to repeat all the steps on the blackboard for the class. Mom walked to the board, and from the memory of her dream, wrote out each step to the solution.

The teacher granted her the guaranteed grade - though Mom loved the class enough to ultimately ace it.

Mom loved to tell that story, I think in part because of the sheer joy she experienced in solving a hard problem.

In spite of many millennia of relationship with God, it might be hard for us to list out the things that bring God joy. The nature of God, omniscient and all loving, also feels transcendent and mysterious. Take a second to think about this. What brings God joy? (pause)   If we turn to the Bible there are a few moments when God's joy is described. At the very very beginning, when God makes each thing, from sea to pumpkin, from tree to human being, at each stage God lets out a joyful sigh and calls creation good. In Nehemiah we're told that God's joy becomes our strength - but we don't hear what that joy is. Jesus tells his friends that he is there in part to share his joy with them, that their joy might be complete.

And then there is Luke 15.

There will be joy in heaven …. when the lost coin is found, when the lost sheep is back in the fold, when all the children are seated at the table.

What brings God joy? Creating beauty; offering strength; finding what has been lost; welcoming people home.

But if that's what brings God joy, then God is terrible at math.

Or maybe God is very good at math - it's just a math that none of us can comprehend outside of our dreams.

Which brings us back to the scribes and the Pharisees, the particular people to whom Jesus preached this parable. This parable was for the scribes and the Pharisees, folks who get a bad rap in Christian tradition, so let me take a moment to debunk that bad rap. These were folks earnestly engaged in understanding the Jewish tradition - working hard to do right in the midst of pretty tough times. Though it didn't take long for Christians to equate them all with hypocrites, if you read the Gospels carefully, these were Jesus' dialogue partners. To stretch my metaphor, they were really good at math.

Amy Jill-Levine, Jewish scholar of the Gospels, reminds us of how the Pharisees were known in Jesus' day:

> "For the majority of Jesus's Jewish audience, the Pharisees would have been respected teachers, those who walked the walk as well as talked the talk…Following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, members of the Pharisaic movement, along with scribes and others, came to compose what has come to be known as rabbinic literature…Moreover, rabbinic literature is often a series of disagreements among rabbis rather than a definitive code; the rabbis debate everything."[1]

I think the Pharisees and scribes (and to avoid stereotyping the whole group, let's say these specific Pharisees and scribes. Let's call them Eleanor and Chidi - bonus points for anyone who gets the reference)[2] are wrestling with a math equation that is so hard, and maybe it's one that broke their hearts. They witnessed Jesus offering love and mercy and inclusion to tax collectors and sinners - and they wondered why he wasn't setting the table for them. (Keep in mind, Jesus had dinner with them plenty of other times….) I imagine them watching the scene in front of them, and tearfully asking, how can God love us, if God loves tax collectors and sinners?   How can there be room at the same table for us and for them? They had been sitting at their desk, running the numbers, erasing and restarting over and over again and wondering, I imagine like the younger brother, whether God loves them. Like the older brother, wondering whether God still loved them.

This parable is the dream that Jesus offers to them, to give them a new solution to the problem.

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[1] Amy Jill-Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus* - Kindle Edition.
[2] Eleanor and Chidi are protagonists in NBC's recent sitcom The Good Place, in which a group of seemingly undeserving human beings find themselves in a heaven-like place and have to figure out a way to keep themselves there.

See, when God gets up to the chalkboard to solve the problem, God doesn't use algebra or trigonometry or calculus. God uses joy.

The equation in front of God looks like this:

Deserves love, mercy, inclusion = Good deeds to the power of the variable x plus the derivative of y squared….

And God comes to the board and erases all the variables, exponents, derivatives and replaces it with Everyone.

Deserves love, mercy, inclusion = everyone.

That's how God's joy changes the math.

And on the next panel of the blackboard, there's a geometry problem. How many people can fit at the table? Length times width times height divided by width of chair = 8. And God just erases that number and writes in, infinite. And says, don't worry, Martha, I'm bringing the fish.

I know this must have been good news for our Pharisees and scribes, for Eleanor and Chidi, because it sure is good news for me.

God's joy is complete when God is able to welcome each and every one of us home. Amen.

Benediction: Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).