

We Are One, but No One Should Count

John 17:1—11

Psalm 68:1—10

Once upon a time there was a math problem. And this particular math problem felt lonely because the answer was always *one*, just one—and, as the song goes, ‘one is the loneliest number.’ Mr. Pinsky, my seventh grade teacher, tried to explain it to me. But I’m not sure I understood its true significance until just recently. And so, without further adieu, here’s the problem in all its glory: *Negative One times Negative One equals Positive One.*

Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, ‘*Why in the world, and in the name of all that’s glorious and holy, are we talking about math? Tell us something about John, chapter 17, verses 1—11.*’ And rest assured: I’m about to do just that. And yet, as we get into what Jesus says here I’d like us to consider the possibility that we haven’t solved the prayer-problem of GLORY. You see, ordinarily ‘glory’ is often thought of—POSITIVELY—in one of two ways. Either it’s pictured as radiant streaks of brilliant light, or it’s meant to convey the legendary stuff of our cultural heroes. Achilles is glorious, for example, until someone shoots an arrow into his Achilles Heel. A sunset is also glorious. A Bruce Springsteen Concert is glorious—especially when he sings about the ‘Glory Days.’ So far, so good. But now, we make the leap: ***“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you...”*** Jesus is praying this prayer; and what’s about to happen? As the story goes, what’s about to happen is pretty NEGATIVE. In fact, in a parallel-telling from Luke 22:44, Jesus is sweating drops of blood. There is going to be a betrayal, an arrest, a sham trial and a crucifixion. Is this God’s answer? Or is this just one factor in the equation of God’s glory? Go figure.

The actor Jim Carrey, so famous for his comedic roles and for his impressions of other famous people, has recently stepped away from the spotlight. He's stepped away and begun talking publicly about Jesus as a model of redemptive suffering and as a gateway to forgiveness. But to an audience at the *Golden Globes* he once joked like this: "You know, when I go to sleep at night, I'm not just a guy going to sleep. I'm two-time Golden Globe winner Jim Carrey going to get some well-needed shut-eye... And when I dream I don't just dream any old dream—no sir! I dream about being three-time Golden Globe winning actor Jim Carrey—because then I would be enough." And you see, what he's exposing here is the futility of living for the glory of one's own ego. Go figure. But no one should count.

The glory with which Jesus has been glorified is "*the glory*" available to him "*before the world existed.*" And correct me if I'm wrong, but before the world existed there was no celebrity-culture. There was no 'going viral' on the Internet. There was no public-relations department in heaven and earth. So let's re-think the math. If Jesus is the Anointed One of God, he appears as a Negative One. He appears as some *One* who is willing and able to subtract himself while everyone else would like to promote themselves. In describing the practice of contemplative prayer the Trappist monk, Thomas Keating, has observed that God "*has need of nothing, except to pour out his goodness and love on those who are willing to accept them.*" Could that be how glory works for Jesus too: he doesn't need to brag about his status; he doesn't need to bask in his splendor; he doesn't need to boast about what he's accomplishing. The glorification for which he prays allows him to step back—and in the Crucifixion, in the Resurrection, and this week as we recall the Ascension, he is giving us the space to follow in these negative capacities.

Tacitus is one of the ancient historians from the first century who, without the prompting of the Bible, referred to Christians—and he did so in the negative. Writing around 115 in the Common Era [AD], he described a terrible fire that burned down most of Rome. Nero had been the Emperor at the time; and Tacitus describes how he conveniently blamed “a class hated for their abominations, known as Christians.” The manuscript then continues on to describe how these superstitious and atheistic people were rounded up, convicted and sentenced to death “not so much for the crime of firing the city, but for hatred against humankind.” And isn’t that the exact opposite of the reputation we might expect? Isn’t that a sort of *inglorious* glory?

Of course there’s always someone in the crowd: *‘Well, thank God the Roman Empire converted. Thank God, two centuries after Tacitus wrote his history, another Emperor became a Christian and launched the Christianization of the whole world. And for that matter, thank God that the United States of America will soon celebrate 250 years as One Nation Under God—and that a glorious stage is now under construction in Washington D.C. from which dignitaries will invite the television audience to pray in Jesus’ name...’* But, you see, what if the glory of the Crucified and Risen and Ascending Christ isn’t the Positive Conformity we imagine it to be? What if it starts off in the Negative?—and Negative One multiplied by Negative One equals **“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me so that they may be one, as we are one” ???** Go figure. We’re given the space. And Jesus is praying that we receive that space in relationship and that we give that space in return. By contrast, we don’t need the ego-expansion of those who are so insecure in their faith that they crave and must possess the back-slapping glory bestowed on them by the majority.

Consider the singing and the syncopation of the following hymn. It's not a popular hymn. It's not a praise song that's made the Top-Ten of the Gospel Hit List. But in the ancient Roman colony of Philippi, a small community gathers to hear the apostle Paul quote lyrics like this:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6
*who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,*

7
*but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.*

And being found in appearance as a human,

8
*he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

9
*Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,*

10
*so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

11
*and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

You see how this works? The glorification of Jesus comes about as he *empties* himself—as he considers *equality with God not something to be grasped*. And what was it Jesus himself said to his immediate followers in Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35 and Luke 9:24? He said things like, ***“The one who would lose his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it...”*** And yet, for some strange reason, it seems as if the vast majority of people won't do the math. So—go figure. Go and figure.

Today, according to Google, there are 49,000 different denominations and that's not even counting the *non*-denominations. And yet, the point isn't how some other churches can boast thousands of members and we should feel badly about our measly 50 odd members at Northwood. The point is—what about that *one* person who gets it and pulls back? What about that one person who declares, *'I don't need to shine so much'* and who therefore allows someone else to shine? Negative One Times Negative One equals *'We Are One.'* And if *'We Are One'* there's no need for us to prove how important the choir is, as compared to the Bible Study, as compared to the outreach program, as compared to the garden, as compared to this sermon. We Are One! And if *'We Are One,'* there's no need to gossip about one servant of God getting nominated to serve versus someone who isn't. Too many times, in my vocation as a pastor, have I encountered certain individuals who want to swell their influence. They won't speak for themselves humbly. They'll say, *'Well, I'm not the only one who feels this way...'* Or they'll say, *'most of the congregation believes like I do.'* And, of course, with varying degrees of success, I try to listen. It's part of my job to listen. But I also wonder. Who's counting? Jesus wasn't counting. He was awaiting his multiplication.

James Gehrke, the author of *Walking the Sacred Journey*, describes the solo bike ride he took on the *Camino de Santiago*, which is this famous 500 mile pilgrimage from the Pyrenees mountains in France to the Cathedral of Saint James. And what I appreciated about his description was how he began his journey as a worn-out and skeptical pilgrim. He was tired of arguing with people and lonely for a genuine and mutual relationship of faith.

“Late in the afternoon I came to a small town and scanned the buildings for the familiar yellow arrow that marks the route. I finally saw one pointing down a side street to the left and, relieved, followed it. It led not back to the Camino, but to a small bar. Outside the bar, another pilgrim waved me over. She was lost too. We soon learned that the bar owner, hoping to draw business, had painted his own ‘helpful’ arrow that pulled us off the true path!

Because of the late hour in the day, instead of backtracking to the official route, we were advised to cut straight across an open field and up a steep hill to reach an albergue before dark. The field was still soaked from the previous night’s rain. I was pushing a loaded mountain bike through mud, sweating in the humid air slipping and sliding under the extra weight of my gear. Every few steps my tires sank. I was hot, exhausted and more than a little miserable. This was not the romantic pilgrimage I had imagined. It was one of the hardest days I had ever had on any trail. By the time I reached the crest of the hill, I was ready to quit—if there had been anywhere to quit to.

At the top, I finally saw it: a simply refuge building. An older man with a white beard—Padre Ernesto—stepped outside to greet me. He looked a bit like Santa Claus in a flannel shirt. Seeing the state I was in, he quietly took my bike, sat me down on a rock, and hurried inside. He came back with a cool, damp washcloth, a glass of cold water, and a few crackers. He let me sit, breathe and come back to myself. Then he showed me a room and made sure I was settled for the night.

Later as evening fell and the heat gave way to a raw dampness, the young woman from the bar finally arrived. She was muddy, shivering, limping badly from blisters, and on the edge of tears. Ernesto met her at the door just as he had me. He sat her down, washed her face, brought her water and crackers and focussed on her as if she were the only person in the world.

Then he did something that changed my life... He knelt in front of her, gently took off her shoes, and with the help of an assistant, began to wash her feet and tend her wounds—slowly, carefully, without hurry or embarrassment. None of us shared the same language, but what passed between us didn’t need translation...”

Negative One Times Negative One Equals ‘We Are One’! We don’t have to do the math problem.

But the prayer?

I *do* wonder about the prayer problem, and how we might work it out.