

It is a joy to be with you again, and a joy to be learning about our church and the community it serves. I feel a deep sense of privilege in representing our church in the community, and as you may know by know, I am not shy about introducing myself to community leaders of all kinds, wherever and whenever possible, so that I can learn better how we can bring our Christian mission to life in this place. Our future as a church lies in our transforming faith in Christ being the cornerstone of our lives, and in building on that cornerstone to help everyone around us understand what deep, life-affirming faith brings to the world.

Yet, sometimes, I imagine that the math of being a small church in a city of 60,000 souls might look a little daunting to some folks, a city that is as complicated as any other large community, in a community within that city with unique traditions and culture. "How can this all add up to a growing church," people might think. How indeed. My message for you today is simple: God's math is not our math, and becoming God's math, becoming the transformed people who are able to transform God's world in the image of God, requires us to grow in faith together. Would you pray with me please: [PRAYER]

A few weeks ago I noticed a sign in the park on Main Street down by the river. It was advertising an event on August 1st, a "National Night Out" in Hubbard Park, sponsored by our police department, and other civic organizations. That night, I went up to Hubbard Park to get to know people who really care for our community. It was a fantastic event - there were booths, and rides, and exhibits, and food. You could meet and talk with our city's police, neighborhood groups, fire departments, schools, churches, children's services, our library, a pet shelter, our local mosque, and more. There was even table for the FBI, where I learned that they have outreach programs for churches, and one for the Civil Air Patrol, who asked if I would be their chaplain! The park was packed with people learning things, having fun, and getting to know the people who really care about them. A former head of city planning said that this event draws over 5,000 people every year.

Over five thousand people, in a city of sixty thousand. That's a lot of people. That's a lot of people who were looking for not just a free burger, or ice cream, or some fun for their kids, but people who wanted to be a part of their community. That's a lot of people who want to depend on one another, and to care for those who depend on them.

Five thousand people, coming to about a dozen tables and booths, seeking something more in their life, something healing, something joyful, something that told them that there was hope for them and their families, something that told them that they, too, were part of something good. None of these people or organizations at the booths and tables had the complete solution. None of them were all-powerful, or amazingly well funded, and many were just volunteers. None of them alone could BE the solution to a city's problems. But together, they could be IN the solution.

This is God's math in action. This is people becoming God's math. This is

humble people, willing to become something more than what they are when they just keep to their own side of the street and out of harm's way. Go to any one booth or table at this event, and you might have been tempted to say, "It doesn't add up, this is not going to make a difference." But taken together, it was the fabric of a community, a community dedicated to being more than who they are individually, a community who knows how to serve from something deep inside of them, a community that does not worry about things adding up, because they are multiplying! This is God's math in action!

Jesus, the Son of God, understood God's math best of all. Jesus, our Lord and savior, shows us in Matthew's gospel today a powerful example of how simple addition becomes multiplication, a multiplication that changed the world. First, please notice that Jesus does not enter this scene on a high note, a place of seeming abundance. His dearest friend, John the Baptist, has just been beheaded. This was a deep loss; Jesus had to spend some time alone to experience the depth of his grief. He experienced just how vulnerable even the purest of God's children on earth are to the evils of this world. It was out of this subtraction of God's beloved prophet, John the Baptist, that Jesus prepared to offer the world God's multiplication.

When Jesus returned to the crowds waiting for him, he offered them what they needed in abundance, curing all who needed God's healing presence. The Greek word translated as "cure" here is the source of our word "therapeutic" - Jesus brought thousands to a better place through faith in God's power, not fixing everything, but giving them God's miracle of wholeness, healing, and hope.

It is at this point that Jesus's disciples came on the scene. Matthew points out that the disciples were absent for Jesus' healing. Perhaps they had decided that the "boss" was the one who should handle the big jobs. Let these people take care of themselves, they tell Jesus. That's enough miracles. Time to get back to things that add up.

But it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for Jesus, who had been discipling his followers through the sermon on the mount, through his commissioning of the twelve apostles, through his teaching his apostles the deep power of God in his parables. Jesus used these parables to teach them how their faith could be like good soil for God's word to create God's abundance, like a tiny mustard seed that could become a huge, life-giving bush of God's kingdom, like a pinch of yeast that leavens a whole loaf, like a field of hidden treasure or an amazing pearl that's worth selling everything for, because you understand its immense value.

Jesus had taught this multiplication to his disciples, not to make them comfortable, but to make them beloved and fearless instruments of God's miracle. Jesus had commissioned them as apostles, not simply to be fed by Jesus, but to feed the world with faith in God's love and power. Jesus had taught them God's way, so that they could become God's way for the world.

The disciples turned to the supplies at hand, and did the world's math. Two

fishes, five loaves. Was it enough for a handful to spread God's hope to thousands? All of a sudden, they had to dig down deep in their souls. They had to accept that having faith in God's abundance is an invitation to become God's abundance, an abundance which comes, like Jacob in today's Genesis story, only when we surrender all hopes for bring our own salvation, and wrestle with God to find God's transforming salvation. The apostles organized the people, and bring God's math to them, in the form of a few scraps of bread and some morsels of fish. It is all that they have to live on by the world's math, but they are ready to help God's math to come to life in the hearts of small groups in this crowd. You see, God's math is simple, and real. Two plus five equals abundance for five thousand, and then some, through communities with the discipline of faith, communities that trusts deeply in God, offering enough even for those who weren't there, because they see how others trust in God.

About a week ago, God asked me to test out God's math in a very real way. A young woman with two young children and their father were about to become homeless. The father of the children had lost his job, and the mother had run out of money. The family alternatives were bad, and worse. I helped the family go through a 2-1-1 interview at our local family shelter, and got them on a waiting list for staying there, but the cold, hard truth was that for several days, they were about to be homeless. The city and state had nothing to offer them for many days. Their families were not an option. The only thing that they had was the faith of a church that loved them, and had offered them God's promises of abundance. I prayed with them, gave thanks to God, and then prayed to find our part of God's solution.

And for this family, this church did God's math for them. Our own church was able to help them with shelter for the weekend. And by Monday, miraculously, there was an unexpected opening at the shelter. The shelter's social worker has been working hard with this family to get them to their next step in life. I continue to encourage the father to look for a job, and to pray for this family, and I pray that you will pray for them also, and to help faith in God's abundance to become abundant in them.

The world's math is addition. The world's math is fixing. The world's math is survival, getting by, taking care of our own side of the street, and letting the rest fall to zero. But God's math multiplies. God's math is about bringing the fruits of eternal life to earth now in the hearts of people devoted deeply to faith, and helping those fruits to spread into people's hearts everywhere. The world's math is being the solution, making everything the way we want it, until everything adds up neatly to our satisfaction. But God's math is about being in a solution that doesn't always add up to the world's liking, taking chances on being connected to the world in ways that makes us realize that healing lives is God's goal, no matter how broken they may be, because that is how wholeness, and joy, and eternal peace, multiply before our very eyes, together.

It is God's call to this church in Jesus Christ to become God's math, for this community, for our own people, and for the world. It is God's call to this church to realize that transforming the world one person at a time is not about addition, but about the multiplication that only a life devoted to faith in Jesus Christ in God's Holy Spirit can bring to abundance. It is God's call to this church in Jesus Christ to surrender all of our stories of loss, of victimhood, of illness, or brokenness, and defeat, to the savior of all creation, who grieved deeply even as he healed us, and to allow that healing, loving, and transforming God to defy not logic, but the limits of our fear-bound imaginations, and to allow the full logic of God's kingdom of eternal love on earth to unfold in our hearts.

You see, God's math makes sense. It is we who have to come to our senses to realize that. May we have the courage to do that, together, as God's people on earth. Amen.