

Don't Sweat The Numbers

Matthew 6: 25-33 (24-34)

Once upon a time in a land far, far away, there lived a nation of people. By and large, they were good people, decent people, industrious and hardworking people. They lived commendable and often praiseworthy lives, dedicating themselves to such endeavors as caring for home and family, building better communities and schools, and helping one another in a variety of ways.

These were people you and I would be delighted to have as neighbors. They had only one quirk, one idiosyncrasy: They were obsessed with numbers. They were absolutely consumed by them.

1. **Numbers, numbers, everywhere you looked there were numbers!** Every year was known by its number. Every day was broken down into numbered parts and people wore jewelry to tell them what number it was: 2:45 in the morning or 7:15 in the evening. Busy people were quick to remind you: **"There are only 24 hours in the day, you know."**

Every house had a number. Every car had metal tags with numbers on them. Major roads were known by numbers like **"State Hwy 150" or "Interstate 45"**.

The government even sold little medallions with numbers on them for people to hang around the necks of their pet dogs, and this was not optional but mandatory. A dog without a number? Why, that was an illegal dog!

These people were so infatuated with numbers that when babies were born, the proud parents would send out announcements that would declare, **"We've got a new baby! She was born at 3:25 a.m. on 10-12-07, weighing in at seven pounds, six ounces and she's 21 and one half inches long."**

Since those numbers were subject to change, a more permanent number was needed. And so the parents would fill out a form, send it in to the government Agency in Charge of Numbers, and that agency would assign the child a nine-digit number that would be theirs for life. Somebody else might have the same name, but, by golly, nobody else would have the same number!

As the child grew, she would be identified by still more numbers. People would say such things as, **"She's in the 95 percentile height, 75 percentile weight. Her IQ is 114 and her GPA is 3.22.**

She can run the hundred yard dash in 12.3 seconds and she's got a half-time job. Where? At 7-11; making 6.75 an hour."

2. The most important category of numbers: the numbers that people earned, inherited or accumulated.

When, for instance, a person worked for a company, then every week or so, the company would take some of its numbers and transfer them to the employee. The bigger the number transferred, the more people tended to respect the job and, hence, the person who held the job: **"He only makes 32,000 a year; she makes 53,000 a year!"**

People with bigger numbers got to live in bigger houses, drive fancier cars and generally enjoy what folks called **"the finer things in life"**.

There were basically three things that people could do with their numbers: **(1) they could spend them, (2) they could save them, or (3) they could give them away.**

(1) The spending was easy and fun. The people were so hardworking and industrious that there were lots of things they would sell you in exchange for some of your numbers. Spending numbers was so much fun, in fact, that most people spent more numbers than they actually had! They did this by promising to pay bigger numbers in the long run in exchange for the privilege of obtaining an item or service now and paying smaller numbers for many, many months to come.

(2) Saving numbers was a different matter. It was something most people agreed was a good idea, but found hard to do. I mean, when you've already promised away 25 percent of your future numbers for the next 360 months for a house, and another 10 percent for 60 months for a car, after the government has already taken 28 percent to run the country and keep its promises, and that agency that assigns nine-digit numbers to newborns has taken 7.65 percent, well, that doesn't leave very many numbers to feed, clothe, educate and entertain the family. Consequently, this nation's savings rate was among the lowest in the developed world.

(3) It was in the area of giving numbers away, however, that the people exhibited the most unusual attitudes and behavior. They were among the most generous people in the world. When

they saw a need (such as hungry people or victims of a disaster or a new program to help unfortunate children) many of them were quick to take some of their numbers and share them with the needy. This sharing made them feel good and happy. So although their savings rate was among the lowest, their giving-away rate was about the highest in the world.

Now the strange thing about the situation was this: if someone would tell these people, **"You know, you really ought to try to save more of your numbers"**, they'd smile and shuffle their feet and say, **'Yeah, you're right. But it's darn hard, you know.'**

If someone were to suggest that they ought to consider giving some of their numbers away to this need or that cause -- maybe more numbers than they gave away last year -- then some of the folks got downright angry and offended.

Strange, isn't it? Tell them they ought to do something they're not doing and they smile and agree with you. Suggest they ought to do more of something they already do and enjoy doing, and they get offended. Well, there are some societies that are difficult to understand.

3. What concerns us this morning is the fact that **numbers became so important to these people that their obsession spilled over into the religious realm.**

I don't mean a mere preoccupation with the number of members on the church roll or the size of the number that the church had managed to accumulate in the bank or even the fact that they had a collection of sacred scriptures one portion of which was called, "The Book of Numbers." No, I'm talking about their actual understanding of God.

They preferred to call God by the mathematical term **"The Infinite."** They believed God was the ultimate source and giver of all numbers, and so if you pleased The Infinite and were among The Infinite's chosen people, then The Infinite would bless you with bigger numbers. Conversely, if you had little numbers or no numbers at all, then clearly you were not among The Infinite's favorite and beloved people. Clearly, The Infinite was displeased with you.

People longed to be one with The Infinite. Bigger numbers were closer to infinity, they reasoned, so it followed that the way to become one with The Infinite was to acquire the biggest number you

could. And all the people set themselves to this task -- religiously! All those, that is, except the ones with little numbers or no numbers at all. They figured that they were so far from The Infinite that there was no point in even trying.

Into this busy and industrious and compulsive situation came the Stranger. He was as mysterious as the square root of a negative number. There was something about him that was as inexpressible as the quotient of a number divided by zero. He conveyed an unsettling message to the people. His message was this:

"Don't sweat the numbers. Numbers are not where it's at. The Infinite cares for you infinitely, no matter what your number!"

Some of the people, especially those with little numbers, were intrigued by the Stranger and his message. Quickly, he developed quite a following.

He spoke to the people of The Infinite's love and benevolence. He told them their needs were cared for because it was the nature of The Infinite to give and give and give and still be undiminished.

And, he added, it's the same way for you and me. The way to the truly happy life is to be relatively unconcerned about the numbers. **"When you give,"** he said, **"that's when you get. You're like a candle lighting other candles. No matter how many times your light is borrowed and divided and shared, it is never diminished. Indeed, the more it is shared, the brighter the world becomes."**

"Just so, The Infinite gives to you more abundantly than you can give away."

And then he added, **"You can never obtain The Infinite. The Infinite is by definition the highest number imaginable plus one. And it's that 'plus one' that always puts The Infinite out of reach."**

Someone asked him, **"Then how do we become one with The Infinite?"**

He replied, **"You can't."** The people were stunned, shocked, and silent. But the silence was redoubled when he continued, **"The Infinite has become one with you!"**

"**That's absurd**", challenged the Chief Number Cruncher of the Temple. "**The Infinite cannot become finite.**"

"**The Infinite**" replied the Stranger, "**can become anything or anyone The Infinite chooses to become.**"

"**And,**" the Chief Number Cruncher said with a sneer, "**I suppose you would have us believe that The Infinite has chosen to become you.**"

"**Your words, not mine,**" said the Stranger.

"**Blasphemy!**" said the Number Crunchers.

"**Heresy!**" cried the Mathematicians.

"**Cancel him, negate him!**" cried the people. "**And let his nine-digit number be deleted.**"

With many such shouts, they put the Stranger to death.

Then The Infinite did what The Infinite does: he gave. He gave never-ending life to the Stranger. And then the people knew that the Stranger had been right all along. His new life was The Infinite's way of saying, "**Q.E.D.: Quod Erat Demonstrandum.**" The Stranger proved that which was to be proved:

He gave so much that he died without a number to his name. Yet he was one with The Infinite. Indeed, he was The Infinite!

People saw that their obsession with numbers was self-defeating. The Stranger's message was trustworthy and true. It Was then. It Is now. And so it bears repeating:

When you give, that's when you get.

No matter what your number is, The Infinite cares for you infinitely.

And so, my friends don't sweat the numbers.

AMEN!

Pastor Larry Smith

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