

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?

I've been thinking about numbers. We assign meaning to some of them, as if numbers were words. It takes two to tango. Three is a trinity. Four corners of earth. Five is . . . five is . . . well, I can't think of anything that is five. But the whole game of numbers starts with number one. And when we count, we are really just saying one over and over again. One plus one is two; one plus one plus one is three, and so on. "One" gets the whole ball rolling, all by itself. In the beginning, One stands alone. That was the Buddha's big realization, five hundred years before Christ. He looked up, on December 8th according to tradition, at the planet Venus and there was no separation between himself and that unimaginably distance object. Venus was one, he was one, and it was the same one. Just one. He is often quoted as saying, "I alone am the whole honored One."

In Deuteronomy 6, our call to worship today, we hear that "the Lord our God, the Lord is One," that God . . . and One . . . are the same. When Moses, speaking to a burning bush, asked for God's name, the response he received was, "I am that I am." And when we speak of our self, we also use that singular, first-person, subjective pronoun, "I." When we write "I," danged if it doesn't look like a "one." In Genesis, we are told that we are created in the image of God. Some would say that this means the I -- or the one -- that I call myself, and the One that God is bear, at least, some similarity. They are both one, and if one is one, the game stops right there. Two isn't even a possibility. And yet, I am not God, am I?

So, we had better get to two, P. D. Q., right? We need someone to blame. We need someone to rescue. Most of all, we

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?

need someone to fix this mess. Forget two! We are going to need three or four. Maybe more. But who's counting? Who IS counting?

What are we saying when we say "two?" Some folks struggle with math, and I sometimes think that they intuitively sense that math involves an impossible leap from one to two. You see, when we say "two," we are really saying that there is one, and another one, so similar that they can be substituted for each other, so comparable that they cannot be distinguished from each other in some meaningful sense. The statement, 1 plus 1 equals two, only has meaning if the first 1 and the second 1 are equal, and we find ourselves back at one.

Let me illustrate with fingers. Here are two fingers, one and two. I can only count them because they are fingers, and a finger is a finger is a finger, right? But look, I can hold up this one all day. I can point with it. I can itch my ear with it. If I wave this other one around, . . . I might get a punch in the nose. So I don't really have "two fingers," I have one pointer finger and one punch-in-the-nose finger.

I have a friend who retired not long ago from Apple. He led high-level engineering teams to develop the technology for a lot of Apple products. In one of our conversations, he told me that the ideal member of his team was not someone who had special talent or insight, or any other unique quality. The ideal human component in the system would be completely replaceable like a light bulb. There was a necessary measure of competence. Obviously, a light bulb has to light up, but it doesn't need to play the trumpet, or make a really good cup of coffee. In this system, two engineers would ideally do the same job equally well, and anything beyond that

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?

would, in fact, potentially threaten, rather than benefit the system because that irreplaceable one could be lost.

Do you see? "Two" cannot even be said unless the two things being counting are both the same in some sense, and at the same time, completely and immutably different from each other. Math isn't just hard, it's impossible!

I think Jesus was thinking along these lines when he told us what happens when two of us are gathered in his name, or when two of us agree, *on anything*. As if! I can imagine Jesus saying that, brushing his hands off, walking away and saying to himself, "That ought to keep 'em off my back."

To take a step further, it is up to the one counting "two" to determine what those two things share in spite of the difference that makes them two in the first place. There is a Zen koan that tries to reveal this. It goes like this:

"The monks gathered in the hall to hear the Great Hogen of Seiryō teach a lesson before the midday meal. Hogen pointed to the bamboo blinds. At this, two monks went to the blinds and rolled them up alike. Hogen said, "One gets it; one does not."

This koan, in part, involves dealing with the question of what one monk gets that the other does not, when they have performed the same task, equally well. The other part is that, in Zen, there is nothing to get. Yeah, I know. That's why Kamie does the Zen, while I do this.

There are two monks, two bamboo blinds, and two tasks performed equally well. It is up to a third, Master Hogen, to decide whether there are two monks, or there is one monk who gets it and one monk that doesn't.

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?

So it becomes very important to ask two questions. "Who is the third one that is counting?," and "How and for what purpose can the two be counted the same?" In Matthew 18, Jesus says "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." On the surface, it sounds like the agreement is the key to unlocking God's intervention, and especially these days, agreement ain't easy. But what if the agreement is that national identity is more valuable than human life? What if the agreement is that certain people are less than human and must be conquered and enslaved? What if the agreement is that certain people are best disposed of all together?

The term, fascism, is being thrown around a lot these days. The symbol of fascism, called a "fasces," is a tight bundle of sticks with an axe blade protruding from it. It was used by Mussolini in World War II, but it goes back to imperial Rome to indicate the collective power a state has over life and death. Each stick alone would be easily chopped up by the blade, but, banded together, two or more sticks can wield the blade and impose their collective will over any weaker, or less armed foe. Agreement, in this case, requires each stick to lend its individual strength to the bundle. The purpose of the bundle is simply to amplify the power of the individual, but it comes at the cost of choosing how the bundle wield's its blade, as well as surrendering the question of who ultimately directs its death-dealing power.

No, the agreement is not the key to Jesus' promise of God's intervention. It is the "two of you," that is, the two that Jesus counts as "two." Jesus must be the Third, the who, the how and the why two or more can be banded together, in order to unlock the power of his Father in heaven. Any other who, how, and why, whether it

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?

is institutional or ideological, whether it is well-intended or not, does not just abdicate individual responsibility, it amplifies it and puts it in hands that are not responsible, which is to say, not subject to the consequences of their actions.

What if agreement between one and one is not possible? What if the very definition of the one depends upon the negation of the other? Like good and evil? Self and Other? Us and Them? I want to call up our other scripture reading, from the gospel we call Luke, famously known as "the Temptation of Christ." We assume that if the temptation comes from the devil, it must be bad, right? Even if it looks good, if it comes from the devil, there must be a catch. But what if it really does look good? Imagine, if you had the power to turn stones to bread, no one would go hungry ever again. The rubble of Gaza would become the finest bakery! Imagine, if Jesus, the paragon of God's justice and goodness, ruled every government on earth. Isn't that precisely what we as faithful Christians hope for, for the US anyway, every time we enter the voting booth? By what twisted logic could this ever be even considered a bad thing?

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn offers his hard-earned wisdom in The Gulag Archipelago,

"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Judaism expresses this duality in the terms, *yetzer hara* (the so-called evil inclination) and *yetzer hatov* (the good inclination). Think

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?

of the little cartoon angel and devil that sits on each shoulder of the hero trying to convince them to go one way or another. ("No, don't say that!" "Yah, go ahead. What are they going to do, fire ya?"). *Yetzer hara* is not so much evil as it is pleasure- or comfort- or, frankly, survival-seeking. It is the voice that looks out for the self's interest. It is the voice that we all can thank for keeping us alive up to this point. *Yetzer hatov* is the voice that emerges, if it emerges, at age 13 or so as we learn that sometimes we must yield to the needs and interests of our neighbors. Bat mitzvah and bar mitzvah at that age marks the beginning of the life-long commitment to obey the greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with your whole mind, with the *yetzer hatov* AND the *yetzer hara*. Not two, and not one.

I now hear the devil's truly tempting offer of authority over all human governments as a catastrophic split between the many voices native to our natures that must be cherished, honored, and heard together for the wisdom only they can provide. The word, devil, is the common translation for the Greek word, *diabolos*, which is combination of two terms *dia*- meaning "across" and *bolos*, the root for the word "ball," meaning to "throw." *Dia-bolos* is the Greek translation for the Jewish word, Ha-Satan, which is translated, the accuser or the opponent. Not the embodiment of evil, and the cause for all our troubles, but the personified force that divides good and so-called evil into polarities, and sets them in opposition to one another. The one that splits "two" into "one" and "one," and puts them in mortal combat with one another.

We have no need for a personified force to do this. Government, all government, by nature and by design, is the ultimate arbiter of who is in and who is out, who is Us and who is

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?

Them. Economies determine who gets it and who doesn't. Legal systems decide who gets to keep what they got or settle for what they didn't. Religious institutions divine who is saved and who is damned. To answer Solzhenitsyn's question, "Who is willing to destroy a piece, in fact, exactly half, of his heart?," we all are. We love God with exactly half of our heart, half of our soul and half of our mind. The other half, we call it the enemy, or we call it God. Who is the third One that can count the two as one, and the one as two? Who can count Good and Evil as two? Who can count Us and Them as two? Who can count Self and Other as two? Find that One and you will know the One who is truly responsible.

One Plus One Equals . . . Three?