Now to [the Holy One] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to [that One] be glory in the church and in Christ to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.[1]

I enjoy math. Note I did not say I enjoyed math *class*, for, like many of us, I retain a few scars from eighth-grade algebra.[2] Rather, I enjoy math's number patterns and dependable formulas, its challenges and the satisfaction of its solutions. Math simplifies the complex, and math can enliven incredible beauty. Survey this spectacular building and recognize the math in every corner, curve,

From *Forever-An-Almost* to More Than We Can Ask or Imagine

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
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and load-bearing stone – all as gloriously rendered as any La Farge brushstroke or Richardson sketch. And beyond what math makes possible, its own elegance inspires wonder – and, every now and then, bears a glad surprise.

In this cyphering Spirit, I am caught by the Ephesians phrase "abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine"[3] – though, admittingly, "I don't know, I can imagine quite a bit" [to quote a swashbuckling space pirate].[4] I wonder: how might we calculate such an abundance? Can we identify a proof for achieving "a unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"?[5] What might the numbers tell us? Well, let's find out.

So, put away your calculators and close your books. Please take out your Number 2 pencil and your worksheet for today (on the back of this sermon). As you will see, today's lesson invites us to convert decimals into fractions. And fear not: to calm any flashback palpitations, we start with an easy one: .25.

I know, I know, you can do this one in your head, but let's go through the steps and show our work, nonetheless. We can simply follow the decimal-point value and change "twenty-five one hundredths" to twenty-five *over* one hundred. From there, we reduce the fraction, dividing both the numerator and the denominator by 25. We end up with 1 over 4, as in ¼.

We all good? Outstanding. Then let's run from the claiming stables to the allowance races:[6] how do we convert a *repeating* decimal into a fraction? Let's give that a try, first with .3, repeating – indicated by adding a *vinculum*, a bar, above the repeating number [and how about *two* quarters for anyone who can work "vinculum" into a non-classroom conversation this week].

We begin by assigning a variable to our decimal. We can choose any sign we prefer, so let's select the twenty-second letter of the Greek alphabet, which happens to be the first letter of "Christ." Though pronounced "Chi," the letter looks like an "x," so, for simplicity's sake, let's call it "x." In our working equation, χ now equals $.\overline{3}$.

Recall from your schooldays that we can do what we want with this equation, provided we take the same action with both of its sides. So let's multiply each side by 10, giving us $10\chi = 3.\overline{3}$. Remembering that χ equals $.\overline{3}$, if we subtract χ from each side, we now have $9\chi = 3$. To isolate χ, we divide each side by 9, leaving us with $\chi = {}^3/_9$. To reduce the fraction, we divide both the numerator and denominator by 3, and we end up with 1 over 3, as in ⅓.

I LOVE that. Super dang satisfying and makes good sense, given that we know 3 will not divide tidily into 1. Now, to move up from allowance rides to *stakes* races, let's convert $.\overline{9}$ into a fraction. [I mean, has math ever been this exciting?!]

First, let's noodle for a moment on the idea of $.\overline{9}$, – a number that is not .9 … or .99 … or even .99999 … but .9andaforeveramountofnines: as close to a whole number as we can get, yet without ever quite getting there. What would such a distance look like? What would that distance *feel* like?[7]

Well, abiding the same strategy as our previous exercise, we multiply each side by 10, to give us $10\chi = 9.\overline{9}$. We then subtract χ from each side, and we get $9\chi = 9$. To isolate χ, we then divide each side by 9, leaving us with $\chi = ^9/_9$. Once more, we divide both the numerator and denominator by 9, and we end up with 1 over 1. Recalling another middle-school principle, any number divided by itself equals one … as in, *1* … a headscratcher that doesn't make the intuitive sense that ⅓ did in the previous problem.

Can that be right? Doubling check our steps … that's correct! And – holy-moly! – isn't it something, a math surprise! Where there was never enough, now there is wholeness. Where there was this mysterious and *forever-an-almost*[8] – now there is fulfillment. If math can theologize, this exercise offers a formula for fruition. And may it not be too on the nose to suggest that if we all give the best we can – not a (less-than)one-and-done, but our $.\overline{9}$, repeating, year after year – then God will bless our faithful commitments into completion.

With that wonderous math on the mind and God's generosity in our hearts, today we begin our 2024 Stewardship season.

When launching these annual efforts, we remind one another that a "steward" is one who manages what is not one's own. As *Christian* Stewards, we recognize that all we have is from God, and we seek to return to our generous Creator, a generous measure of what has been entrusted to us. We at Trinity invite every household in our community to make a financial commitment for the upcoming year. We call this commitment a "pledge," and we view that pledge as a covenant between us and the God of all creation.

If math can theologize, this exercise offers a formula for fruition.

By our faithful pledge we promise to make a priority of our relationship with God.

By our faithful pledge, we become partners in God's saving work.

By our faithful pledge we become an essential element of a movement, an undertaking greater than what any one of us could accomplish alone.

By our faithful pledge, every one of us has an equal share in every Trinity ministry.

And because God has chosen the Church as the primary instrument of salvation, these spiritual devotions of sacrifice and grace have critical, practical implications: namely, funding this parish's ministry. Still, we do not pledge to keep the church's lamps lit or the organ sounding. Instead, we first celebrate that God has made us in the image of the Divine – generous and loving and good – and *we* give, because *God* gives.

The near-term tension, of course, is that we must honor the considerable responsibilities attendant to the blessings we receive here. We must meet our shared obligations, for we spend only what we can afford, and we can afford only what has been given and granted. Therefore, our invitation to Stewardship has two goals: individually, we pray that every member of this congregation will pledge faithfully; and, collectively, we trust we will then have all we need to further God's great and glorious dream.

Our Ephesians appointment details that dream, God's hope to reconcile all people to God and to one another "on earth as it is in heaven."[9] In the Beloved realm, *we will be made whole*: there will be "one body and one Spirit, one [hope], one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and [Creator] of all, who [will be] above all and through all and in all."[10] And with all of us receiving a fullness of Grace according to Christ's gift, we will build up this Body, every ligament and limb growing and giving in *Love*.[11]

This fulfillment moves creation from never quite enough, to "abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." See this Gospel abundance is not the lavish granting of more than we need so that we can choose to give what we deem "extra." *No.* Instead, Gospel abundance makes us whole by *unifying* us, joining us to God and to one another by sharing a common generosity and a common hope. When I give my best, and you give your best, the Holy Spirit meets those gifts and creates something greater than their sum – more than we expect, a math surprise!

Returning to the mystery of those .9s, without all of us offering faithful commitments of time, talent, and treasure – of "humility, gentleness, [patience, and love]"[12] – *none of us* can reach wholeness. We simply cannot accomplish God's hopes alone! Without faithful companions in the household of God, the best any of us can realize is that dreadful *forever-an-almost.*

Too often, denominational Christianity has assembled a theology excusing this shortfall. Affirming trust in God's unfailing Grace, the Church shrinks God's vision, commending us to work only for the survival of Christian institutions (a goal we foolishly believe more achievable if separated from God's highest callings), rather than giving our whole hearts for Beloved Community. With this diminished vision, we grant ourselves

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permission to underestimate our *personal* capacity, to underestimate our *congregations'* capacity, and to underestimate the Holy Spirit's power and readiness to support us in seeking God's most marvelous ends. We dream too small and expect too little, fearing success and growth more than dysfunction and death.

Let us push back against such solipsistic madness! Let us invest in one another and share in God's vision. And in this Stewardship season, **let us give our *very best* gifts**.

Whether that best gift finds you early in your Stewardship story and discerning a pledge for the first time; whether that best gift finds you aiming for the tithe, the first 10% of one's income; or whether that best gift finds you leaping from the tithe toward higher, heartfelt horizons; take out your #2 pencil – resisting the temptation to do that work in your head, and, instead, taking faithful steps to consider your pledge from your heart – and then give with all you are, from where you are. Join in God's abundance-making, believing that "the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to [that One] be glory in the church and in Christ to all generations, for ever and ever."
Amen.

Endnotes

1   Ephesians 3:20-21.

2   Mrs. Rambin, bless her heart.

3   Ephesians 3:20.

4   That would be Han Dadgum Solo, in response to Luke Skywalker's promise of reward for rescuing Princess Leia.

5   Ephesians 4:3.

6   For those whose grandfather did not take them to the track, this is a horse-racing metaphor – there was a lot of math at Louisiana Downs!

7   Though gettin' whooped 34-0 in the National Football League surely feels bad – Who Dat!, Patriots fans – how much of an improvement is it over coming up short by the thinnest of margins?

8   "Forever, and that's a mighty long time."

9   Matthew 6:10, familiar to us from the Lord's Prayer, of course.

10   Ephesians 4:4-5, familiar to us from our baptismal liturgy.

11   From Ephesians 4:15-16.

12   Ephesians 4:2.

Directions: Convert each of the decimals into a fraction.

1. .25

   $25/100$

   $1/4$

2. $.333\bar{3}...$

   $x = .\bar{3}$

   $10x = 3.\bar{3}$

   $10x - x = 3.\bar{3} - .\bar{3}$

   $9x = 3$

   $x = 3/9$

   $x = 1/3$

   $1/3$

3. $.999\bar{9}...$