



Multiply!
“BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FLASH CARDS?”

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Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Pastor Laurie: Hi JD! How’s it going?

JD: It’s OK.... I’m having trouble with a math problem.

PL: Oh! I LOVE math! I can help!

JD: (*unsure*) Ummm.... Okay, I guess you can try. I have to multiply 31 times 3.

PL: OK, let me get out my flash cards. I saved them from when I was a kid for just such a time! I knew I’d use them someday! (*gets cards out of fanny pack*)

JD: What are flash cards??

PL: You don’t know what flash cards are?! They help you memorize multiplication tables. Okay, what about a slide rule? (*gets slide rule out of fanny pack*)

JD: Huh? What’s that??

PL: You know, you use it to solve math problems.

JD: Ummm....that was probably like a hundred years ago or something. You must be as old as my grandma!

PL: Probably.... But I did know a little something about new math when my kids were in school.

JD: Pastor Laurie, it’s okay. You’re just living in the past. You have to move into the 21st century! We have a whole new way of learning how to multiply.

PL: Hmmm...OK. How do you do it?

JD: We don’t just learn math facts anymore. We do what is called “inquiry based math” where we learn the HOW and the WHY behind the math and we don’t just memorize.

PL: Hmm. Sounds complicated.

JD: You see, if I understand how and why to solve 31 times 3 then I will be able to apply that to doing math in the real world. It's a whole new way of thinking about math.

PL: OK. Makes sense.

JD: And I was thinking that you could apply the same thing to our church! If we want to share the love of Jesus and multiply our faith, we have to move into the 21st century and understand the culture and be willing to try new things to reach new people.

PL: Yeah, you're right! Like what we are doing in Berkley. We're finding a new way to multiply to build God's kingdom!!

JD: Exactly!!! But here's the thing....they won't be using a slide rule or flash cards in our new church. Just think about it, OK? After all, I know all about these things now that I'm in 4th grade.

PL: Do you want to be our consultant in Berkley?

JD: No.

PL: Well, if you ever change your mind, you're hired!

God wants you and me to multiply. That's our mission, right? In Genesis, after God created human beings, God said, "Be fruitful and multiply!" In other words, God encouraged us to have children. Granted, we don't multiply as quickly as some animals, like rabbits.

Did you know that Pope Francis stirred up some interest a few months ago when he said that Catholics don't have to breed like rabbits? He did say that. And how do rabbits breed? Well, rabbits can begin breeding when they're between three and nine months old. Female rabbits gestate for only thirty days and can have anywhere between four and twelve babies. Once they're born, the mother rabbit can become pregnant again the very next day, which means that some rabbits can give birth to over a hundred babies a year.

Let's just say a starter bunny has twelve litters a year of just three female rabbits each time. Because of the principle of multiplication, if each female rabbit produces three more female rabbits in every litter, after year two, there will be 1,369 female rabbits. And after year three, there will be 50,363 female rabbits. Aren't you glad we're not rabbits!

More important than multiplying offspring, God wants you and me to multiply our faith by sharing it with others and making disciples. Can you imagine? Jesus had twelve disciples, with another one added after Judas died. Over the past two thousand years, those twelve disciples multiplied their faith by making disciples who made disciples who made disciples, so that today, in 2015, according to the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, there are 1.2 billion Christians in the world.

Have you ever thought about the multiplication sign itself? It's a cross, isn't it? It's just tipped over on its side. The \times symbol for multiplication was introduced by William Oughtred in his 1628 book, *Key to Mathematics*. He chose the multiplication sign for religious reasons to represent the cross.

It's believed that the apostle Andrew was crucified on an x-shaped cross. It's called a saltire or St. Andrew's Cross. Andrew is said to have told his executioners that he was not worthy to be crucified on the same cross style as Jesus and persuaded them to alter the shape.

It's because of the cross, it's because Jesus gave up his life for you and me that we are compelled to multiply our faith by sharing it with others. But, as JD reminded us, the most effective ways of sharing our faith have changed over the years.

That's exactly why First Church is engaged in multi-site ministry, which is a relatively new way of growing churches. It's been found that starting new worship and ministry sites is a more effective way for large churches to multiply than growing their present site bigger. Over the fall we are going to talk about many different ways to multiply our faith. But there is a common place to begin. You and I cannot share a faith that we don't have. And how do we get faith? Why, we find our voice.

Everyone in this world has a voice. Everyone. By virtue of their birth, all people on this planet have the potential to discover and use their gifts to make a difference in their small corner of the world. I have said many times that most people have no idea how capable they are, physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. They haven't a clue how smart, insightful, caring or wise they are because those gifts have never been identified and nurtured.

In order to be whole people, you and I need to find our voice. Have you ever literally lost your voice? Maybe you have a cold or laryngitis, and you just can't speak. All you can do is whisper. It's frustrating, isn't it?

Have you ever figuratively lost your voice? Do you ever feel as if your voice has been silenced? Who doesn't have a voice in our world? African-Americans and other ethnic groups often have no voice. The poor often have no voice, because, after all, it's money that speaks, right? Women, some religious groups, immigrants, LGBTQ folks and those with physical or mental disabilities often have no voice. Any group that has a minority status can be left without a voice because those in power have the authority to take that voice away on a whim.

But all people deserve to have a voice, even children. Have you ever heard the phrase, "Children should be seen and not heard?" Fortunately, we don't use it as much as when I was a child, and rightly so. This past summer our then three-month-old grandson River and his family stayed with us for two weeks. It was an amazing time in River's life because he was discovering his voice. He'd sit there in his car seat with a big smile on his face and experiment with making cooing sounds. He was trying to communicate with me with his facial expressions and his voice, and, of course, like all grandparents, I made a fool of myself by cooing back.

We carried on a fabulous conversation without saying anything that made sense. Makes your heart melt, doesn't it? But you know what? When River gets older, our job will be to help him discover his true voice by finding his passion, his vocation and God's call in his life. It's never too early to start, because God chooses children to be faith multipliers, as well.

The prophet Jeremiah writes, “Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” Then Jeremiah said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to Jeremiah, “Do not say I am only a boy. For you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.”

Did you notice how God called Jeremiah? Jeremiah was not a self-appointed messenger. Since God called him in the womb, Jeremiah had no choice in the matter. His voice came from God, even though he protested that he was too young when he was called. Jeremiah was a prophet to Israel during the invasions of Judah and its chief city, Jerusalem, by the Babylonians from 597-582 B.C.

He had a tough job. No one wanted to hear Jeremiah’s voice of doom and gloom. No one wanted to be chastised. Yet Jeremiah’s very life was a symbol of Israel’s death and restoration. He never married and had no children as a sign of the end of life. Jeremiah was arrested, imprisoned and left in a cistern to die, narrowly escaping with his life. He even bought a plot of land in Judea to symbolize the renewal that was to come. Even though no one seemed to listen to Jeremiah’s voice, still the Hebrew community gained hope from his witness.

How do you find your voice? Finding your voice means looking inside your heart to see your God-given potential. It means listening to the voice of Jesus, saying, “I love you. I have intentions for your life. I have called you to be a voice of love and hope in this world.” Every one of you here today has a voice, a unique voice. And you find that voice by opening yourself to the movement of the Spirit in your life.

Just as important, though, finding your voice means listening to other voices confirming your call. These encouragers are faith multipliers, and they’re all over this church. They’re children, youth and adults who help others become faithful, generous, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ.

That’s how it works. Finding our voice means discovering the potential that was given to us by God before we were even born; a potential confirmed by the Holy Spirit and the voices of others; a potential that envisions a hopeful future.

But once we find our voice, it’s not the end, for finding our voice is not ultimately about us. It’s not about reinforcing our middle class American ambition-oriented understanding of self. Finding our voice is not about you. It’s not about me. And it wasn’t about Jeremiah. It’s about identifying and multiplying our voice to empower others, not to pressure or steer them in the direction we want them to go. It’s about inspiring others to find their own voices. It’s about multiplying our faith in others.

This past Tuesday night a group of fifty leaders at First Church spent three hours with a consultant to define our congregation’s voice so that we can multiply our voice in new and more effective ways through multi-site ministry. You see, there is a spiritual intensity that kicks in when we encounter the living God and risen Christ and discover anew our voice. We spent most of our time determining our core values and how God is calling us to constantly realign our

priorities so that we can focus our passion for multiplying faith by reaching new people with the good news of Jesus Christ. God is calling First Church to use our voice in a mighty way to make a difference in the world.

Have any of you heard of Misty Copeland? On June 30 of this year, thirty-two-year-old Misty Copeland made history by being the first black woman promoted to principal dancer in the seventy-five year existence of the American Ballet Theater. For over a decade Misty had been the only black woman among eighty dancers in the American Ballet Theater. She was also honored as one of *Time Magazine's* 100 most influential people for 2015.

Misty Copeland has become a cross-over star, which is highly unusual for a ballet dancer, and her 2014 memoir, *Life in Motion; An Unlikely Ballerina*, became a bestseller. What you may not know is that Misty's single mother raised six children on her own, and they were constantly moving, sometimes even living in a cheap motel room. Misty did not take any formal dance or gymnastics classes until she was thirteen, incredibly late for a female ballet dancer.

One day Misty saw gymnastics on TV and decided to audition for a drill team at a Boys and Girls Club near their home. The coach suggested she take ballet classes. Of course, her mother couldn't afford lessons, so a local ballet teacher took Misty in on scholarship. Misty hid in the bleachers the first few weeks because she had no ballet clothes to wear.

Because a drill coach and a ballet teacher empowered Misty Copeland to find her true voice, she overcame incredible obstacles to become successful. In a July interview with Diane Rehm, I heard Misty say this, "My challenges have been an opportunity to improve and learn and grow. Most ballet dancers do not have an opportunity to have a voice. I have a platform and a voice and want to use every opportunity to educate people that this is a possibility for you, too. Through diversity initiatives, you, too, can have access to top notch training." Misty Copeland is a faith multiplier. She has multiplied her impact on millions of people, especially children and youth, because she was empowered by her mother and several caring adults who believed in her. Now Misty, in turn, is empowering others to find their true voice.

But what about the flash cards ... and the rabbits? Well, flash cards were a great way to learn multiplication fifty years ago. But today we use different methods to learn to multiply. So you and I use our voice to share our faith with others in new and innovative ways because we have one goal. To make disciples of Jesus who use their voice to share God's love with the world.

Have you found your voice? Are you using your voice to build the kingdom of God? You see, it doesn't matter who you are. God says to each one of you, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I gave you a unique voice, only for you. Now go, find your voice, multiply your faith, and inspire others to find their voice." Amen.