

Life is not a zero-sum game

Neither is religion.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 3, 2019](#) issue



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Zero-sum game theory, in which one party's gain requires another party's loss, is not a theory to live by. The scorekeeping and power displays inherent in this win-or-lose approach are uninspiring at best and vengeful at worst. There's nothing lovely in thinking that my happiness requires someone else to be unhappy or that my appreciation for what I have in life depends on someone else having less. I don't require other children to be seen as failures in order for my children to be viewed as successful. My wife's beauty doesn't necessitate the conviction on my part that somehow other women are ugly.

Zero-sum thinking doesn't make for good politics either. The idea that somebody must win and somebody must lose in every economic, legislative, or geopolitical transaction makes for a broken body politic and an anguished world. When congressional politics become entirely zero-sum politics, each side will viciously protect its interests. Legislative gains on one side of the aisle mean, by definition, an equivalent loss for the other side.

President Donald Trump isn't the first president to use zero-sum thinking as a political tactic, but he may be the first to make it the cornerstone of his presidency. When, for example, Trump recently announced that the country was "full," he couldn't have meant that he was personally convinced the US could not physically accommodate a single additional migrant or asylum seeker in some apartment on some street in some neighborhood of Portland, Pittsburgh, or Poughkeepsie. He was suggesting instead that menacing losses would be in store for US citizens if new immigrants were to receive food, shelter, and other legal and humanitarian accommodations.

Zero-sum thinking also doesn't make for good religion. When mixed with the gospel, it becomes highly problematic. Some Christians wonder what joy their salvation will bring if God saves everyone—as if joy in salvation depends on the misery of some people being damned. This kind of perverse zero-sum thinking has no place in the economy of God.

We fool ourselves when we entertain the notion that there is only so much love to go around. When I receive more love, is somebody else therefore receiving less? If I share my \$5,000 by giving four people \$1,000 each and end up having only one-fifth of what I had to start with, zero-sum thinking would suggest I'm in a deficit situation. But love and generosity don't work this way. The world is not an inelastic, closed

universe. To give is to receive. To shower others with blessing is to be blessed oneself.

When a wealthy young man walks away from Jesus one day after learning how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, the disciples worry that they've made a mistake in following Jesus. Peter shares the group's zero-sum mindset: "We've left everything to follow you. What then will we end up with?" To Peter's obvious fear of loss, Jesus offers an alternative word: "[You] will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life." Zero-sum thinking fosters a logic of scarcity—"What will I have left?" God's promise of abundant life offers a better way.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Zero-sum living."