

NOT COUNTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Matthew 14.13-21

August 6, 2017

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

I am reminded this morning of the prayer Jesus taught earlier in Matthew:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy *will* be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our *daily bread* ...

Perhaps those early followers learned to pray this prayer together.

But then they get the unsettling news that the political powers have killed their comrade, John, and Jesus goes off by himself to be alone. Maybe to re-evaluate. Maybe to ask some deep questions. Maybe this is the first time, seeing the consequences of their message, Jesus prayed that *other* prayer about God's will: "If it be your will."

We know later in Matthew (26.39), facing his own death, Jesus prays: "If it be your will, let this cup pass from me."

But now the crowds are gathering.

In the face of the news about John, in this reality-check about whose will it is that is actually being done on earth these days, in their fear about the future, they know they need to be together. And so the people come.

And Jesus sees the crowd and he has compassion on them and he teaches them and he heals them.

“When it was evening,” Matthew 14 says, “the disciples came to Jesus and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’¹⁶ Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’”

It is one thing to pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And it is one thing to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.” It’s another thing for Jesus to say to those disciples: “*You* give them something to eat;” *you* give them the bread they need for today.

¹⁷They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’¹⁸ And Jesus said, ‘Bring them here to me.’¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, *besides* women and children” – not including women and children; or, as Megan McKenna says, “not *counting* women and children.”

So, I want to talk about counting this morning.

There is numeric counting – the kind of counting we teach children to help them organize their perception of reality.

I am counting the days – there are six – until Patrick returns home from camp. That numeric counting says something about who Patrick is to me.

Politics can be obsessed with counting – just ask President Trump how many people were at his inauguration. Polls tell us something about who we are.

Churches can be fixated on numeric counting. Most Monday mornings I get an email with the number of people who were in church on Sunday. And it might be easy to say that “numbers don’t matter” but numbers do have something to say about what it means – how important it is – to us to show up for each other. As I always say, “Never underestimate the power of showing up.” That count I will get tomorrow morning will tell me something about how much this community matters to you.

All the way back in the first century there must have been someone whose job it was to do the counting because Matthew says there were 5000 men – not counting women and children – who showed up that day.

The story tells us the number to let us know how important this gathering was for people – how big the crowd of those who needed to hear some word of reassurance and hope.

And sometimes numeric counting can help us to see a problem.

In the story, there are 5000 men and only five loaves and two fish. The math doesn’t line up. The numbers tell us that there is a problem.

The fact that there are 2.3 million people in jail right now in the United States – the highest incarceration rate in the world - and another six million on probation or parole, tells me that we have a problem in our country. The disproportionate number of those being people of color should tell us that we have a race problem and a justice problem and I think it means we have a drug treatment problem and a mental healthcare problem.

The fact that there are, by some counts, 49 million people struggling with hunger in our nation, including 12 million children, in a nation that has made food a multi-million dollar entertainment industry, says something about who we are and what matters to us.

The 2017 “Count Us In” report for Seattle King County says that on January 27 of this year there were over 11,000 people in our region dealing with homelessness – over 6000 sheltered and almost 5500 unsheltered, living in cars and doorways and on the streets.

These numbers tell us something. They tell us that we have a problem.

And sometimes the problem has to do with a different kind of counting. It can indicate to us the kind of counting that has to do with values; what or who “counts” and who doesn’t.

This is where Roman Catholic scholar Megan McKenna comes in. She says the problem in this story is the last line: “all those who ate were about 5000 men, *not* counting women and children.”

And she suggests that no first century mother and no first century child would ever go out into the wilderness without some food. Men might. Like Jesus heading out into the wilderness to be tempted. But women and children would know better.

Barbara Brown Taylor wonders if there weren’t little chunks of bread, little bits of something “wrapped in a handkerchief, stuffed up a sleeve.” Like my grandmother who always had a little something stashed away that she could pull out when we grandkids got a little antsy and unruly.

McKenna and Taylor suggest that when the disciples bring to Jesus their five loaves and two fish and Jesus looks up to heaven and blesses and breaks the bread, this act of sharing the disciple’s little bit of food began a flurry of sharing what little bits these women and children had.

And here’s the thing, McKenna says, if that is true, then it was the exactly ones who didn’t count – the women and the children – who had the food. It was the ones who didn’t count that made the miracle happen.

But that's no miracle, right?

It's no miracle when a child asks the question that gets right to the heart of something important.

It's no miracle when an old woman who has been discounted most of her life refuses to move to the back of the bus and inspires a whole movement for social justice.

It's no miracle when people with disabilities rise up to derail an unjust healthcare plan.

You can ask Patrick when he gets home but it's no miracle when people with special needs go off to camp and change your life.

Those don't count as miracles. Right?

Or do they?

What if it is exactly the people we think don't count that can make miracles happen?

What if, in the face of politics and fear and tiny resources and really big problems, what if that little bit we have to offer – that little bit we don't think will count for very much – could change the world?

What if this little bit of bread and this tiny cup of juice we call "Communion" is meant to give us a taste for something – a taste for what we mean to each other; a taste for counting the dis-counted; a taste for imagining that the little bit *you* have to offer is the stuff of miracles?

"You give them something to eat," Jesus tells the disciples. And today, if you hear *that* voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Bryan Stevenson talks about incarceration rates in *Just Mercy* (Spiegel & Grau, 2014), p.15. National hunger statistics can be found at www.loavesfishes.org. The 116-page 2017 “Count Us In” report can be found online at www.allhomekc.org. Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (Orbis Books, 1994), pp.7-32. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp.47-53.