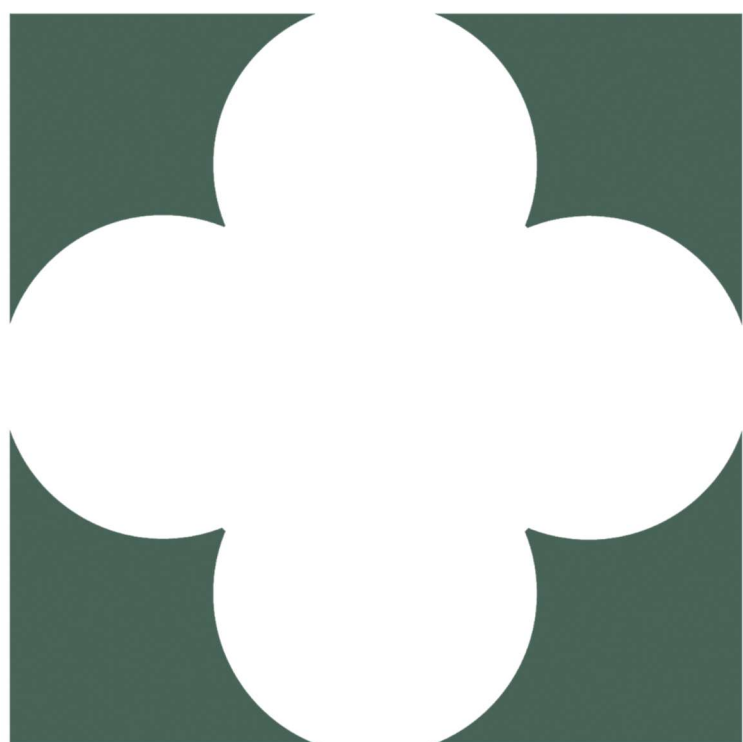


Counting and Discounting

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Luke 15

I need some help. *(get a couple volunteers)*

Let's count how many people are with us in worship today.

Is it hard to count how many people are in here? Why?

Is it also a way to count if we say: "Bob's here. Erin's here. Aleah's here..."

One way of counting is knowing each person who is among us, knowing that we are glad to be here together and that we "count" to each other. As we look who's here, we also see who's missing from our number, who we are missing ... that's a way of counting, too. When we join together with our community, we "count on" each other!

There are many ways to count. In preschool, we learn how to recognize certain numbers and quantities by sight. For an example inspired by Luke chapter 15, we might say, "I see four coins" or "I see six sheep." With these small numbers, I don't have to pause and count number by number, identifying each specific coin or sheep.

Our gospel story today, often called "the Parable of the Prodigal Son" is the third in a series of stories about counting. First comes the parable of the lost sheep. We might imagine that counting was a bit tricky for the shepherd in this parable: if she had five sheep, it would be easy to notice if one sheep was missing. She could recognize that fact by sight. If she had twenty sheep, she might just have a slight, nagging feeling that something is not quite as it should be. She might have to take a moment and go through her roll call to see if she was missing someone. But if she had one hundred sheep, as the parable goes, it probably took her a little while to figure out that a sheep was missing, and, after counting and finding that sum is short, which sheep in particular was missing.

And then we have the second in the series, the woman who lost one of her ten coins. Though ten is quite a bit less than a hundred, she still may have had to pause a moment to make sure that she had all of the coins. And when she found out one was missing, she set about looking for it, looking everywhere! "But she still had nine," you might say, "that's still a good number of coins." But this parable reminds us that the sum of all the coins only matters when each coin is counted.

And finally, we come to the last of the three parables, which Brooke read for us. Professor of New Testament Dr. Amy-Jill Levine writes, “In our reading, the three stories are connected. The first two stories set up the third. The main message is about counting, searching for what is missing, and celebrating becoming whole again.”¹

Well, the father in this parable certainly had an easier time of counting his sons than the shepherd did in counting one hundred sheep or the woman did in counting her ten coins. He just had two sons—one, two! That's easy to count, right? Well...not so fast.

Counting is not only a numbers game. We also are counting when we assign value or recognize someone's worth. And we are discounting not only when bargain shopping, but when we neglect to recognize or value as well.

This was something the father in the parable learned the hard way. One son, two sons. One son left home to travel and spend money, one son remained at home. The family was incomplete when the younger son left, and then when he finally returned, they had to celebrate! But wait...the family was still incomplete because the older son was left out. He hadn't been invited to the party!

Listen to what the older son says, “I've been here the whole time, have never left and wasted all my inheritance like that other guy you call your son, and yet I don't feel appreciated. Do you even see me? You forgot to invite your own child to the party!” The older son doesn't feel like he counts. He feels like his dad has taken him for granted.

Now is the time when the father realizes the error of his ways, inviting his older son into reconciliation. “Come to this party for your brother. We were not a complete family without him, and we are not a complete family without you either. Come join us.”

Of course, as the kids in Godly Play would tell you, we don't really know what happens next in this story. Does the older brother listen, and embrace his father? Does the father return to the party to help his sons make up? Does the older brother turn away, asking for his inheritance and heading out into the world on his own? Does the younger son greet his brother with joy? We

¹ Who Counts? By Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso.

don't know! In Godly Play, as is our custom, we say, "I wonder..." when we are not given a clean, neat and tidy ending.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine suggests exploring this parable by trying on different characters and different relationship dynamics in the story. For example, she says, "When we read parables, we should ask ourselves: Where am I in this story? How am I like the man who lost his sheep, the woman who lost her coin, the father who feels he may have lost both his sons? Do I ever feel like the lost one? How am I like the younger brother who does not want to stay home? How am I like the older brother who does everything the father tells him but who does not feel that he is loved? The parable then prompts other questions: have I lost something, or someone, and not paid attention? Is there someone I take for granted? What, or whom, have I forgotten to count?"²

And it is these questions: "who counts? Who do I count? Who do WE count?" that call to me in this Lenten season. In this season of being attentive to the simple joys of grace all around us, we are practicing what I have sometimes called a "ministry of noticing." A careful observation, a taking stock, a counting of those moments of grace as we live every day in this world. Part of this noticing can also be about what, and who, we take for granted. Who do we go about each week seeing and paying attention to, and who do we gloss over or forget? Whose attention do we crave and try to impress, and whose opinion doesn't matter to us? Who are we always sure to invite, and who do we leave out because their presence is an afterthought?

We can practice this right here in church, as we did together at the beginning of the sermon. We can count and try to assign a number to each individual person in this room, we can organize ourselves to understand demographics and membership history. Once we have a number, maybe we will print that number in our bulletin to show that our church is "healthy" and "growing" and that we have a strong and vibrant community-- numerically...But do we know the names of those who aren't here well enough to call on them in their absence? Do we know the life situations of each of those people with whom we share a pew or a choir row? How do we show each other that we don't just count each other as a number, but we

² Who Counts? By Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso.

count each other among our family, as those companions on the journey through this life with whom we share dreams of embodying the kin-dom of God?

Beloveds, when we are counting our community, and counting ON community, the focus is not on quantity, but on quality. When we are valuing wholeness, we account for the ways we count on each other. I like to call this “counting and discounting” “Jesus Math.” And let me tell you, “Jesus math” equals much more than 100% because we simply can’t count, can’t even begin to grasp the abundance of God’s goodness that is revealed to us when we resist the urge to dis-count those whom we do not know or do not understand, those who have strayed from the flock, those who we do not count among our visions of who is “us.” Friends, what matters is that we count each other among the kin-dom of God. When we truly count each other as one of our church family, together as we try to follow the Way of Jesus, when we count on each other as more than numbers, but as precious individual beings made particular in the image of God, then we are exponentially growing our community within the love and justice and grace of God.

As I pondered the story of the man with two sons, the man who didn’t fully count his sons, who forgot his sons, and as I watched the videos of the nomination hearing, I found myself wondering, “Whose excellence do I discount? Whose voice do I take more seriously and whose voice do I take less seriously? Who do I expect great things from, and who do I not? Who am I taking for granted?”

This past week as Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson was being examined by the Senate as part of the confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, many people noticed the respectful, professional, courageous demeanor of the judge, even as she was asked irrelevant, asinine, and downright racist questions. People who have been silent on issues of racism in this country noticed the deep well of emotion expressed in that single tear Judge Jackson shed as Senator Cory Booker proclaimed that no one can steal his, or her, joy, because she has worked for the position she is in. And Church, as some friends who are women of color pointed out, it should not take a Black woman being moved to tears to cause White folks to have empathy for those oppressed by racism or to recognize Black excellence.

There's a lot to notice about how the world has responded to the war in Ukraine over the past month as well, much of which we can count. We can count how many Ukrainians have taken up arms to fight for their freedom. We can count how many protestors have been jailed in Russia for being against the war. We can count the refugees, over 3 million of them, flooding out of the country, the biggest refugee crisis the world has seen recently. We can count the number of Facebook posts and Twitter threads and news articles about this war. We can count the number of African and Middle Eastern students told to wait to board trains out of Ukraine because the white people got priority. We can count how many times the words "freedom fighter" are used to describe Ukrainians. We can count how many other words have been used to describe Afghans, Yemenis, Ethiopians and others who are also at war. We can count the number of wars in countries with majority-people-of-color that have not gotten the worldwide press and sanctions that Ukraine is now getting. We can count how many of those wars have been backed by the United States government. In Ukraine, and beyond Ukraine, our ideas about "who counts" matter not only numerically, but in terms of whose lives are meaningful enough to move the hearts of the powerful, and whose lives are worth enough to report on, and whose lives we value enough to save.

Friends, y'all know that Sweet Honey in the Rock recording of "Ella's Song" that says,

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*

The first verse goes like this:

*Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons*

This song, like the parable of the father with two sons, is about counting. It is a plea for those who are often discounted to be valued. And a later verse names the power of collective action as they sing,

*Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me
I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny*

Let us be one in that number, I pray.

At the beginning of Luke 15, people around Jesus were grumbling about who he was keeping company with. They said, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They were trying to draw a line between who is in and who is out, who is welcome and who is unwelcome, who is us and who is them, who counts and who is dis-counted.

But Jesus didn’t fall for that. Instead, he told a story. A story about how the flock cannot be whole even if it is missing one sheep out of one hundred. A story about how the financial sum cannot be whole even if a woman misplaces one coin out of ten. A story about how a family is not whole if one child is missing, no matter if that child left willingly or if that child has been taken for granted. Who we count and how we count affects how we are a-count-able to each other.

Beloved church, hear the good news: You count. As an individual, beloved child of God, you matter. Each of you matters. Each of you makes this congregation what we are, what we can only be together. And our siblings across the world, in places of peace and in places of war, in places we’ve visited and locations we’ve only ever dreamed about, they count, too. Each of them is an individual, also beloved children of the Holy. This beautiful, complicated, stunningly interconnected world is our home, and it is only home when each of us matters.

Dear church, my prayer today is for peace. My prayer today is for hospitality for all the world’s children. May we not be like strangers or guests to each other, but let us be like children at home. Each of us, counting, *never discounting*. Together in this place we call home.

May it be so. Amen.

Benediction

Lord,
Lead us from death to life,
From falsehood to truth.

Lead us from despair to hope,
from fear to trust.
Let peace fill our hearts, our world and our universe.
Let us dream together, pray together and work together,
To build one world of peace and justice for all.

-Author unknown

*(It is thought to be either an adaptation of a Hindu prayer or of a hymn.
The first time that it was known to be publicly spoken was by Mother
Teresa in 1981.)*