

When it Doesn't Add Up!
Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-32

Some time back, member and our church accountant, Tim S., told me a joke that I have gotten a lot of mileage out of over the years, and it has been ringing in my ears a lot lately, so I thought I would share it with you all today – because I love jokes, and I think we need to be able to laugh together often these days. So here it is – pay attention:

There are three kinds of people in the world: those that can count, and those that can't!

Of course the humor in this joke comes from the fact that the teller of the joke falls into the category of those that ***cannot count...*** but the reason this joke has been ringing in my ears lately is because it seems to embody our political and social world in some painful and ironic ways these days. Having arrived, on March 1, at the first day of the newest crisis in Washington and the implementation of spending cuts due to what has been called the “sequester”... one has to wonder, do the people who are running our country know how to count? Now, don't worry, I am not going to try to do financial analysis of this issue, because even scratching the surface of it makes anyone who tries ***crazy*** for all the contradictory information that is out there. But there are ways in which this issue has become ***symbolic*** of our political and social reality lately, and embodies an irony that our New Testament texts invite us to explore a little today. In a way, the ways money and resources are used in our

country and around the world seem to reflect another version of the joke I shared a minute ago: Perhaps I would have been more accurate if I had said: ***There are three kinds of people in the world: those that COUNT and those that don't!***

So, the question I am asking today is ***who counts in our world?*** Who is making the decisions? And who is paying attention? Who matters enough so that laws and social programs are made to protect and provide for them? And who is going to do the counting so that the ways we manage our resources match the needs and realities of the people and planet?

Fran and I read the whole of chapter 15 in Luke because the two parables that Jesus shared ***before*** the one about the prodigal son (that we know soooo well!) are really provocative in their own ways. When I read these words of Jesus, who was talking to the Pharisees and said, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” I laughed! I thought Jesus got it totally wrong! – He should have asked, “Which one of you ***DOES*** go after the one?” Which one of our leaders... which one of the shepherds of our country's resources is going to bother to go looking for the lost sheep? And you know what, it's not a hard task – they are easy to find! They are everywhere! They are the homeless youth that are living in cars or under bridges... they are the folks losing their jobs

for the second and third time... they are the 50 percent of Americans who do not have enough to eat on a daily basis. Which one of you goes after the lost sheep? And speaking of not being able to count – wouldn’t it be NICE if the number of sheep that were safe and well were actually 99 percent! Who counts? And who’s counting?

And then when I read, “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’” This past Friday was International Women’s Day, and as I thought about this story of the woman and the coins, I remembered a statistic I had read recently, (speaking of counting): According to the Economic Policy Institute, **in 1979**, male college graduates’ hourly wage was **11 percent** higher than a female’s in the US. **In 2011**, that percentage had GROWN to **24 percent!** So men NOW earn 24 percent more than women – the divide is bigger! Of course a woman is going to celebrate finding a lost coin – because every coin counts when the world is so inequitable! And forget about coins – how about **women’s safety and health**? How is it possible that laws protecting women’s safety are up for discussion? So I ask again, who counts? And who’s counting?

A few years ago I saw a film that had such an impact on me that I believe I probably think about it almost every day. It was called: **Kilowatt Ours**, and it was a documentary about our environmental/energy crisis. (We actually watched it here together, so some of you may remember it too.) What I remember most profoundly were the charts and graphs and images shared in that film which

made the equations of energy consumption so concrete that they turned me into a bit of a fiend about conservation. One I remember really well was the bucket of coal that it takes to keep a light-bulb on for a certain number of hours. This, combined with the photo footage of mountains that had been flattened in order for that coal to be harvested... and the people and animals who had lived in those mountains now without their homes, incomes, or habitats... all of these images (along with the current reality of fracking in the area where our Pennsylvania home is) have profoundly impacted me, so that I now feel as though ANY waste of energy is simply sinful. **Any** light on that could be off is wrong! **Any** thermostat temperatures that are unnecessarily high are wrong... and the shame and guilt I feel about the ways that I am wasteful are now bordering on pathological. But all these things put together make me ask again, “Who counts? And who is counting?”

What it seems to add up to, to me, as I do **my** very non-scientific COUNTING, is a LOT of wastefulness, and a LOT of greed... and a lot of carelessness and selfishness! In other words, it adds up to a lot of **prodigal** sons and daughters who are not paying attention to others, and who are not bothering, **really**, to **COUNT** as they go about their business... It seems to add up to a whole social and economic class in this country that seems to be saying, “Look, just give me MY SHARE of the inheritance that is due me as an American (which is an inheritance gained in some questionable ways, by the way) and let me **just USE IT UP as I desire**. I’m not concerned about my brothers and sisters, really. They don’t **count** right now. I have mine – who cares about them. They’ll be fine!”

And when I think about all of this, I find myself, of course quite solidly in the shoes of the older brother in the parable that Jesus told. I grumble around this church, and grumble around my house turning off lights in rooms with no one in them, because I keep literally seeing buckets of coal in my mind’s eye that used to be beautiful mountains just burning up for no reason! And I grumble around turning thermostats down and challenging myself in my house to see how many degrees I can lower it without ending up an icicle, because I see, concretely, the wells and contaminated water that are the result of my use of natural gas! I do all of this, and on top of this, day after day I hear the stories of friends and members of my extended family, or of this church, and others around our state who are suffering because of lack of health care, or access to adequate housing, or ability to get to a job, or keep a job because of loss of other benefits, and I will admit, I worry and stress, and become hyper-vigilant because OTHERS matter – OTHERS count! The planet COUNTS – and damn that younger, wasteful, prodigal brother! Doesn’t he see that what he is doing damages others as well as himself?

In the story that Jesus told, in the time that Jesus told it, the actions of that younger son would have brought incredible shame on the father and the family. He wasn’t just being selfish and wasteful – he was bringing profound shame on his family and he was hurting them by his actions. By cultural rights, the father would have done well to disown that son, and move on, trying to save whatever reputation he and his family had left in the village.

So the Pharisees, as they are listening to Jesus tell this story, perhaps also would have found themselves in the shoes of the older son, because here was Jesus –

ostensibly a leader and teacher since people were following and listening to him – hanging out with the unclean, and breaking the rules of church and society! Here was Jesus, counting in very different ways than they would... and I am guessing they might have felt some of the resentments that we feel when we are careful and diligent and concerned about the responsibilities we have been given, and then someone comes along and changes and breaks all the rules! Who is it that counts, again? And who is doing the counting?

There is an irony in that original joke that I told. It is set up: “There are THREE kinds of people in the world.” And then, when the joke teller lists only two, we laugh because the teller hasn’t been able to count. But there *are* actually THREE kinds, right? There are those that can count, and those that can’t, and then there are those that THINK they can count, but really can’t. And these people, believe it or not, *still count!*

I will admit that *I really want God to count the way I count...* and to judge and punish the people in our world who have the power and the resources to make it a better world, and yet are wasteful and greedy and careless with what they have been GIVEN by grace. I will admit that I get kind of crazy when I think of these folks and how much difference they could make, with just small efforts, really... and yet I know, they will not. I will admit that my heart is not always generous to these people and institutions and corporations and entities. I will admit that I resent them. A lot!

And if you notice, we never find out if the older brother actually joins the party when the father, again at the cost of his dignity, leaves the party to invite him in. We are left with the image of him outside the party,

pouting, resentful, and angry. And today, I am right there with him. I want people to COUNT! I want the people who are in charge of the counting to do it well and right! And I want the people that haven’t been counted, who live in the margins of society and suffer there, to be counted! And when the people that have **not been counting well** or right REALIZE they have not been doing so, I’m not sure I want to be part of the party that COUNTS THEM IN! It just doesn’t add up!

But God does! **God counts even those that don’t count.** God counts even those that no one else was counting! God counts even those that thought they could count but actually couldn’t, and then realized it and came home! God counts the ones who count, the ones who do the counting, the ones who weren’t counted, and the ones who counted wrong! God counts us through 40 years in the desert, all the way to the Promised Land and beyond, as we celebrate in the scripture from Joshua. God counts us when we grumble and complain, and God counts us when we are faithful to our tradition. God counts all – Jesus counted all – every lost sheep in the bunch!

Maybe we don’t have to join the party right away – but if we don’t eventually, would we not run the risk of becoming those who think they can count, but can’t? There are, after all, three kinds of people in the world!

And maybe we don’t have to join the party right away – but God is at **that party**. And there is only one kind of God! How long do we want to miss out on that?