
ON WHAT ARE YOU COUNTING?

Some years ago, the keynote speaker at the Baptist National Convention in Kansas City was to be the great evangelical preacher, Billy Graham.

- Hours before he was to speak, people began to arrive and fill the arena.
 - The room was occupied to capacity so that chairs had to be brought in, and all these were also filled a full hour before the scheduled time for that keynote address.
 - Even in front of the stage and on the back of the stage behind the speaker's platform, where the leaders of the Baptist Convention were seated, there were people sitting on the floor to hear Billy Graham.
- Then a whisper went through the crowd: "There's Billy Graham! He sitting on floor below the stage with the rest of the crowd!"
 - Sure enough, Billy Graham had filed in with everyone else and was sitting on the floor waiting to be called to the stage to speak.
 - Many would have given up their own seat to him.
 - Yet here he was, the main speaker of the evening sitting on the floor.
 - Soon, he did step up to the platform and speak to the crowd.
 - Perhaps his words have been forgotten, but for many, the memory of him sitting on the floor has not.

The need to be noticed comes high on the list of values and priorities for many.

- But I think it's difficult for most of us today to imagine the reaction JESUS' words in today's gospel passage would have caused.
- To us, this seems like rather humdrum, polite advice.
 - (Not that we'd necessarily like to be told this in front of a crowd, but it probably would not have done more than make us uncomfortable.)
- But for JESUS' first century hearers, living in an honor-vs.-shame culture that was intensely sensitive to issues of status and recognition, this would have seemed at the very least rude on the part of JESUS,
 - and at the most, extremely offensive.

Yet, there were few things that in JESUS' day that would be more humiliating than to have your host ask you to move to a lower position at a social gathering.

- You would feel like you'd been named an upstart, someone who thought too much of him- or herself, one who didn't know hers or his place.
 - And the physical act of moving to a lower seat would mirror a drop in your prestige and social position.

Thirty-five years ago, the church I served celebrated its 120th anniversary.

- All the former pastors were invited to come, to wear their vestments, and sit in front during the service, as well as bring a word of greeting.
 - Following the service there was to be a dinner in the Fellowship Hall,
 - but because the pastors would be greeting worshippers as they left the worship center, we decided not to have a head table, nor to wait for the pastors to finish, remove their robes, and then come in to eat.
 - Everyone could just go in, go through the buffet line and find a seat, and the pastors would do the same when they came in.

- The other pastors liked this idea, but one former pastor's wife was livid and made that abundantly known.
 - "After his service to this church," she said, "there should have been a head table with the pastors *and* their wives,
 - and everyone should have waited until the pastors had gone through the food line.
 - "This," she continued, "would allow the congregants to come to the head table to greet the pastors (and their wives) rather than them having to go around to see people."
 - Her husband later apologized to me and explained that's, since he had retired, she missed the spotlight of being the pastor's wife
 - and was counting on having that again, at least for this one day.
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Counting. It's so prevalent in our lives today.

- Whether we're counting the amount of money in our bank accounts,
 - or the opinions of our family and neighbors on what we do or wear, we are continually counting.
 - Why? Because we live with the sure conviction that there is always more to be gained.
 - More money, more time, more prestige, more resources, more recognition...you name it, it has to be counted.
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I served a church where, early in my ministry there, a very wealthy member told me that I should let him know if I ever needed help—financial help—with a project or ministry.

- A few months later, however, when I asked him to provide \$100 to purchase special Bibles for a recovery Bible study group I was starting, he told me that this was not something he was willing to do.
 - He went on to explain that you can't put brass plaques in Bibles, so he wouldn't receive the appropriate recognition for his gift.
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Counting. JESUS says this is not where one's focus should be.

- But HE goes well beyond just offering advice on social etiquette.
 - HE continues by admonishing HIS listeners not to take into account the social payoff or reward of their invitations and hospitality.
 - Indeed, JESUS tells them not to invite to dinner those who already respect them,
 - or who are in a position to reward their hospitality by inviting them back in return.
 - No, HE says. Instead invite those who can't repay you:
 - the poor, the sick, the socially unacceptable, those who don't rate.
 - Level the playing field and invite the outcast; raise up those who don't rate.

And I think HE means it!

- JESUS' whole life was focused on inviting into the presence of GOD those who neither expected nor deserved such an invitation.
 - And HE imagines us doing the same.
 - HE expects us to stop counting the costs, the benefits, the rewards of our actions,
 - and live from a sense of abundance and blessing.

When we live with a mindset of counting, we will find ourselves also comparing:

- How much do they have?
- How much do I have?
- Do they have more than they merit?
- Do I have what I rate?

A lot of you have heard me reply when asked how I am, "Better than I deserve!"

- You see, when I look at my life and how it measures up to what GOD wants from me, I know that I fall far short and am truly blessed by all that GOD has given to and done for me.
 - More than that, it is no longer about what I have compared to others;
 - it's rather about how fortunate I am to have all that GOD has given me.
 - And that changes my perspective from counting and comparing, to blessing and abundance.
 - And that, in turn, moves me to think, not about getting and achieving, but to giving and serving.

Think about where JESUS' life was focused.

- It was always on relationships.
- It was about raising up those who were laid low,
 - about giving to those who had little or nothing to give,
 - about bringing into community those who were living in isolation.
 - What would it look like at work, at school, at places where we volunteer or socialize, if we were to look for those who seem pushed out to the margin of society, and invite them into the center by inviting them into our lives?

Now I realize that JESUS' words are phrased as a command, but I really think JESUS means them to be an invitation to us--

- an invitation to enter into a life freed from the unnecessary constraints and burdensome worries of what everyone else thinks,
- and into a world of joy by playing GOD'S helper in handing out the abundant gifts of dignity and worth and value,
 - the same gifts with which we have been blessed.

On what are you counting in your life?

- Let it go and simply count yourself blessed to be loved by GOD.
 - And then discover or continue to discover the pleasure and purpose of sharing through the power of the HOLY SPIRIT what you have received.
 - Find the GOD-anointed joy of claiming your place and ushering others into GOD'S realm of abundance and blessing!
 - Because if you're counting, that's all that matters.