

September 11, 2022 – Luke 15:1-10

One of the biggest temptations that many pastors and congregations face is numbers. Worship attendance, new members, baptisms, Sunday School attendance, VBS attendance, budgets, giving per member. Once every year, the synod collects a statistical report of this kind of information and it is a solid page of numbers.

Now, don't get me wrong: numbers are useful. Sometimes we need to quantify information. Sometimes we need to have numbers to plan for the future. To identify problems. To have goals.

And the Bible certainly contains its fair share of numbers. There's an entire book of the Bible called the Book of Numbers, after all. And if you've every tried to read through the census of Israel from which the Book of Numbers gets its name, the number of numbers is dizzying. Likewise, the Book of Acts loves to highlight the numbers of people brought into the faith after Pentecost. Three thousand, five thousand, “multitudes of men and women.”

These numbers exist to demonstrate the work of God amongst his people. The way that God had brought growth to his people even as they sat in Egyptian slavery. The way that God preserved and provided for his people even as they wandered the desert for forty years. The way that the Holy Spirit used just a dozen apostles to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to so many. These are good numbers. These are powerful numbers.

But more often than we'd like to admit, congregations and pastors use numbers for a different purpose: to measure success. To measure their own success. And we get very puffed up and proud when the numbers increase. As Isaiah puts it, we are like a king who says, “By the strength of my hand and by my wisdom I have done this.”

And, likewise, we despair when the numbers are decreasing. When the pews are empty, when finances are dwindling. And in those times, we begin to lose heart. We worry about the future. We go into survival mode.

The love of numbers is intoxicating. Our sinful nature worships at the altar of numerical success. Numerical growth at all costs. To the extent that the numbers themselves become an idol.

The Bible talks about this use of numbers as well. In 1 Chronicles 21, we read about King David ordering a census of his army. And from the very beginning, we learn that this was not a census that God had directed him to take. No, the text says that his decision to do this was incited by the devil.

Because David was motivated simply by sinful pride. He wanted to know how big his army was. Not because this information was necessary for him to be prepared for battle or provide for his men. No, he wanted to know how big his army was because it made him feel good about himself. It made him feel arrogant and powerful. It filled him with pride to be the commander of such a huge army.

And for that pride, David was punished. God sent a plague that swept through that very same army and killed 70,000 of the men. If it had been a battle, it would have been the worst military defeat of David's entire career. And so David learned the hard way not to idolize numbers.

Our text today is about numbers as well. One hundred sheep and ten coins. Big numbers, in their own way. A flock of one hundred sheep was a respectable sized flock for a single shepherd. Ten silver coins was probably worth several hundred dollars.

But the parable isn't about one hundred sheep. It's about one sheep. It's not about ten coin. It's about one coin. It's not about a congregation full of people. It's about one person. One person who is lost.

And that was a facet that the Pharisees struggled to grasp. Because they, like us, tended to worship numbers. And the number they cared about was the number of righteous people in Judea. The number of righteous people listening to them preach. The number of righteous people following their teachings and their laws.

And I think, like us, their idolatry of numbers started innocently enough. Because even though the Israelites had returned from Babylonian exile over five hundred years before, the memory of that event still weighed heavy on them.

They knew they had messed up. They had worshipped false gods. They had doubted God's ability to protect them. They had forsaken the sacrifices at the Temple and the observance of festivals.

They had failed to act righteously. And so they had been punished. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The Temple had been torn brick by brick. They had gone into exile. And when they returned, nothing was the same.

God had done all this with the goal that they should repent. That they should seek his forgiveness. His grace. Cling to His Word. Until the day His Son would be born and show them His power to save.

Unfortunately, they took it in the wrong direction. They took this as a call to legalism and self-righteousness. As a call to make as many people as legalistic and self-righteous as they were. With the hope that maybe, just maybe, if the Jews proved their righteousness to God enough, if enough people obeyed God's Law perfectly, He would send a Savior to make everything the way it was before the exile.

In their idolatry of numbers, they had missed the point. God wanted them to learn repentance. To learn his forgiveness. To cling to his Word. They did everything except that.

No, the people learning repentance and forgiveness and the power of God's Word were the tax collectors. The sinners. The people that the Pharisees had rejected, because they wouldn't increase their numbers.

But Jesus doesn't care about numbers. He cares about people. Individual people. He cares about the one. The one sheep who has wandered off. The one coin hidden in the darkness. The one sinner who needs to hear God's grace.

And the funny thing is that, in doing so, he increased the number of righteous people. Because in taking away their sins, he gave them his righteousness. In dying for them, he gave them his life. In giving up his Spirit, he gave them his Spirit.

And I have to think that fair number of them turned from their sinfulness to be people more like what the Pharisees were looking for. Matthew, Zaccheus, Mary Magdalene, and so many others had their lives transformed by Jesus' grace toward them. By receiving sinners and eating with them, Jesus made many to be righteous.

By receiving sinners like us and eating with us at the table of his altar, Jesus made us righteous. You see, numbers sound great when you're talking about everyone else. But when it comes to your own salvation, you're just glad that Jesus came for one person: you.

The Church has a Great Commission to go to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teaching them everything Jesus commanded us. Going to all nations is great. There are just under 8 billion people on this planet. We, the Church, need to go to all of them. Young and old. Rich and poor. Black, white, and every shade in between.

But you know how you do that? One at a time. By teaching one child in our school. One youth in our confirmation class. One coworker. One cousin. One neighbor. And we don't worry about reaching 8 billion people. We worry about reaching that one person.

Because the numbers don't really matter. Not to us. Not when all of heaven rejoices over one person repenting. That's our standard of success.

And yes, hopefully, Lord willing, there will be another one. And another one. And another one. Until all 8 billion have heard and repented and believe the good news of Jesus Christ. That would be wonderful. But just one is worth rejoicing over.

So do as Jesus did. Receive sinners. Eat with them. Tell them of the God who left heaven itself to seek and to find you. Tell them of the God who searches the dark corners of this earth, who gets down into the dust, who is buried in the dust of death, to seek and to find them. And let them know that there is repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all who believe in him. Amen.