

“The Numbers Game”

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Based upon John 21:4-14; Rev. 7:1-4,9-10

Imagine you were in the boat with the disciples that day in Galilee, when the risen Christ showed up on the beach. At loose ends since the Resurrection, not really knowing what to believe or do, you and the other disciples decided to stick with the familiar and join Peter on a fishing expedition. All night long you cast nets over the side of the boat without any success. Then dawn breaks, and some smart aleck, recognizing your lack of success, shouts from the beach, “Try throwing your net on the right side,” no doubt provoking in you the same kind of reaction that back seat drivers provoke today. But you do as he says, and suddenly two things happen. First, you catch so many fish that you can barely haul them in, and second, you realize that the guy on the beach is actually Jesus, who at this point had only appeared two other times to your group since his death. Thrilled once again to be in the presence of the risen Christ, Peter can’t get to him fast enough, and dives into the sea to swim to shore. You follow with the rest of the disciples in the boat, bringing in the big catch just in time for breakfast. Jesus already has a fire going ready for a fish fry, and all feels right with the world because he is there. Whatever the future holds, you know he will make it good. Whatever you’re supposed to do, you believe he will tell you. Giddy with excitement after having been confronted again by the miraculous extravagance of God’s love, you decide there is only one thing to do that morning. You look at Jesus, sit down, and begin counting the fish. One, two, three....

Wait! Is that really what you would do in such a moment? I don’t think so. Yet here in John’s wonderful gospel epilogue, it says that the big catch Simon Peter helped to haul in contained 153 fish. It’s such a weird number that people have tripped over it ever since the gospel was written. Did the disciples actually sit down and count the fish when Jesus was right there? Because if so, then we need to stop criticizing Martha for missing the point at her dinner party with Jesus, and start using this story as the example of discipleship mealtime obtuseness instead. When God Incarnate is waiting to share a meal with you after having been resurrected from the dead, you don’t say, “Hey Jesus! I’ll be with you in a minute. I just have to count all these fish first!” But if the disciples didn’t count the fish, then that means that John supplied the number, most likely in order to make a point in his narrative.

As I said last week when we considered what a reference to three days in the Bible means, oftentimes, although not always, numbers in the Bible convey a kind of theological shorthand of their own, testifying to God’s handiwork or human being’s redemption. The number 153 is such an oddly, specific number, that it seems like it must mean something even though it doesn’t appear again in the Bible. If John simply wanted to convey that the disciples caught a large haul, as some scholars insist, then he could have said, “They caught hundreds of fish,” or “The net was overflowing with fish.” But 153? That sounds more like an answer to a “How many jelly beans are in this jar?”-kind of question, than just a synonym for “huge.” It must mean something.

For centuries, Christians who believe that numerology is like a secret code woven throughout the Bible, have studied John's fish count for hidden messages. Augustine was convinced that it was evidence that the Gospel was going to supersede the Mosaic covenant. Using a logic which sounds more tortured than insightful now, he said something to the effect of: "153 is equal to the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 17; and 17 is equal to the sum of 10 and 7; and there are Ten Commandments and seven fruits of the Spirit. So, isn't it obvious? The law has been fulfilled by the Spirit. Jesus wins!"¹ Others have provided equally farfetched interpretations grounded in creative math, also creating potentially toxic theology in the process.

There is one interpretation, however, which is grounded in reality instead of potentially delusional math, the one my tour guide in Galilee offered, as well as St. Jerome in his day. In Jesus' day, there were 153 species of fish known to the people who lived around the Mediterranean.² Thus John could have been trying to convey that when it came to our being beneficiaries of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, no one would be left out. As author/pastor Ted Loder explained it, if "'Catch-22' is shorthand in our culture for the idea that the systems of the world are rigged so that you can't win no matter what, then 'Catch-153' says, you can't lose, not really, not finally...153 represents all the varieties of fish in the world, which is to say, all the varieties of people in the world, all caught and held in the net of God's grace. The net doesn't break, which means there is a place in the kingdom for all us poor fish."³

This image of the whole, wonderful diversity of humankind being saved by God's grace appears again without fish in another text attributed to John, but most likely written by one of his followers. As we heard a moment ago, in the *Book of Revelation* Chapter 7, the author, "John," is taken up into heaven and shown "a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages," all worshipping the Lamb on the throne of God. This great catch is too huge to count according to the text. John gets to see this image during an interlude in his dream between the breaking of the seven seals and the tribulation on earth. It is a vision of hope, and a sign of the abundance and inclusivity of God's saving love.

Now we have to be very careful when we read *Revelation* because apocalyptic literature is filled with so many symbols and codes that it is hard to interpret. In John's day, his Christian audience would have known what everything stood for, from the seven seals to the Lamb and the tribulation. Now we don't. But scholars do know that the point of apocalyptic literature was to give believers hope during a time of persecution, by weaving that message into a text that the persecutors couldn't understand but the faithful could. In other words, apocalyptic is not prophecy that we should interpret literally. It is spiritual inspiration for the present, in the form of a coded reminder that God's plan will ultimately end well. In the case of *Revelation* 7:9, we are assured that not only will nobody be counting the multitudes in the kingdom of God, no one

¹ See Koester, Craig R., *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 312-313.

² *Ibid.*

³ Loder, Ted, *The Haunt of Grace: Responses to the Mystery of God's Presence* (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, Inc., 2002), 160-161.

could even if he wanted. Young, old, male, female, everyone will be together, appropriately giving their undivided attention toward glorifying the Lamb, instead of counting their fellow fish.

This is good news for all of us, but unfortunately, it is also news that has been lost on many Christians because of the part of Chapter 7 which comes immediately before John's trip to heaven. The text says that while on earth, John overhears angels talking about "sealing" or somehow protecting 144,000 people, twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, by writing God's name on their foreheads. John doesn't see the people, or count them himself. He just hears talk about the number. But recording that part of his dream was enough to convince some Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses especially, that the invitation list for those who are redeemed by Christ and get to live forever in heaven with God, is quite limited. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that only 144,000 are truly saved, which is quite a doctrine considering that right now there are more than 8 million Jehovah's Witnesses in the world.⁴ Talk about a scary game of eternal musical chairs. You can be faithful according to that tradition your whole life, and still end up without a chair with your name on it in the end. Everyone is vying for the same limited seating.

There are all kinds of ways for this understanding of the 144,000 to be refuted. In the first place, the number is not meant to be taken literally because this is apocalyptic literature. There are currently 7.53 billion human beings on earth. Trillions more have lived and died throughout the ages. For Christ to die for only 144,000 makes no sense, and is entirely inconsistent with the God of love we know in Jesus, the gospels, and the Pauline letters. Add to that fact the additional facts that after the exile, Jews were not organized by tribes in the same way, and the fact John gets the names of the tribes wrong, and it is even clearer that the number is meant to be symbolic. As I said last week, the number 12 is associated with God's special blessing – hence twelve tribes of Israel and twelve disciples. So, a number of 12 times 12 x 1,000 is more of a symbol of a perfect or complete number chosen by God, then it is a literal head count.

Second, even if you wanted to take the number literally, if you keep reading the rest of *Revelation*, you learn in Chapter 14, that this group has been specially blessed, not by virtue of being the only humans saved, but because they have been chosen for a specific job. After being martyred on earth, they become part of a special heavenly chorus which alone gets to sing a special song to the Lamb on the throne. The chorus of these specially chosen warrior/singers, consists entirely of chaste, virgin men, almost like God's heavenly castrati choir. So, the 144,000 are not the only ones saved. If they were, no women or children or married or unchaste men would make it into heaven!

Our faith tradition believes that Jesus came and lived and died and rose again for all people, male and female, young and old, of every tribe and nation. But the fact that so many have fixated on the finite number instead of on the multitude, has had me thinking all week of how the myth of scarcity, which is fundamental in our culture, infiltrates our faith in destructive ways.

⁴ See Penton, M. James, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses*, 2nd Ed. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999). 193-94.

Think about what we hear day in and day out: “Spaces are limited;” “Act now because only a few are left;” “Hurry, time is running out.” Think about the recent college admissions scandal, in which parents were willing to pay tens of thousands, and in some cases hundreds of thousands of dollars to guarantee their children a spot in a specific college, as if there weren’t thousands of other colleges from which to choose. Think about the current hit *Avengers* movie, *Avengers: End Game*, in which the bad guy is convinced that the only way to balance the universe and make it paradise for everyone is to eliminate half of the living creatures in the universe, leaving everything left for the other half. We are always counting in our culture, who is in and who is out. We measure value by rarity, and are suspicious of the idea of everybody receiving the same benefits. It smacks of socialism or communism; it makes us feel like the prize isn’t valuable, or that our merit isn’t being adequately measured. Some of us are better than others, we believe. Some are more deserving. There’s only so much of the good stuff to go around in our world, so it must be the same in heaven. And even if there were enough room and resources in heaven, if God loves all of us, then God’s taste is suspect, and if God saves all of us, then grace is cheap. So, instead of embracing God’s grace as the gift that it is, we end up counting, always counting: one, two, three....

As today’s texts show, that perspective is such a distortion of the Gospel. When Jesus died and rose again, he did so for the good, the bad, the beautiful, and ugly, the faithful and unfaithful. He rose for those who murdered him as well as for those who followed him. Thus, scholar Richard Rohr has argued: “Grace cannot be understood by any ledger of merits and demerits. It cannot be held to any patterns of buying, losing, earning, achieving, or manipulating, which is where, unfortunately, most of us live our lives. Grace is, quite literally, ‘for the taking.’ It is God eternally giving away God—for nothing—except the giving itself. Quite simply, to experience grace, you must stop all counting!”⁵ It would have been ridiculous for the disciples to count the fish in the presence of the risen Christ, and it’s ridiculous for us to do the same.

There’s a wonderful story that doesn’t have to do with fish or holy singers, (so forgive me for mixing metaphors), but it illustrates well both how God’s redeeming math works and how we are called to respond to it. A little Spanish boy in Vigo who became a devout Christian was asked by an Englishman what influenced him to become a disciple. “It was all because of the odd sparrow,” the boy replied. “I don’t understand,” the Englishman said in surprise. “What odd sparrow?” Well, Senor, it is this way,” the boy said, “A gentleman gave me a Testament, and I read in one gospel that two sparrows were sold for a farthing. And again in *Luke*, I saw, ‘Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings?’ And I said to myself that Nuestro Senor (our Lord) Jesus Christ knew well our custom of selling birds. As you know, sir, we trap birds, and get one chico for two, but for two chicos we throw in an extra sparrow. That extra sparrow is only a make-weight, and of no account at all. Now I think to myself that I am so insignificant, so poor, and so small that no one would think of counting me. I’m like the fifth sparrow. And yet, oh

⁵ *Animating Illustrations*, cf. “counting,” HOMILETICSONLINE.ORG, www.homilecticsonline.com, citing Rohr, Richard, adapted from *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 155-57.

marvelous, Nuestro Senor says, ‘Not one of them is forgotten before God.’ I have never heard anything like it, sir. No one but he could ever have thought of not forgetting me.”⁶

We don’t need to count who among us will be the 144,000, nor should we count the fish before we spend time with the risen Christ. No one is forgotten before God. Wouldn’t it be wonderful then, if we stopped mentally and physically, politically and socially counting people out in our daily lives? If God’s net is big enough to hold us all, why isn’t ours? May our hearts learn to stretch as large, for our sakes and the sake of the one who gave everything so that we all could rest in God’s grace. Amen.

⁶ *Ibid*, *Animating Illustrations*, “counting.”