



**“A PLACE FOR YOU...TO SERVE”**

John 6:1-14

Rev. Shawn Lewis-Lakin

First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan

*After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also, the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”*

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven...

Each week our ushers count the number of people who are in each worship service.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen...

Why do we count people? It’s a data point we can track; it is one indicator of each services’ vitality and appeal.

More significantly, and here I quote something that I heard Bill Ritter, our former senior pastor, say when he was mid-career and I was early in my ministry (back when I had black hair): “We count people, because people count.”

**We count people, because people count.** To count you, I need to see you.

One, two, three, four... Counting people seems to be a straightforward exercise. But at 8:15 and 11:00, do we count the choir? They are in the service, but they don't stay for the whole service. How about today at 11:00 a.m., do we count the confirmation students we are commissioning? They will be here when the service starts, but then they will leave.

Counting people is not always a simple exercise. And if we count people because people count, then how we count is an expression of how those we count—or don't count—are valued.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our gospel lesson for today is the story typically referred to as the feeding of the five thousand. It is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels.

In the story, there is a count of the people who were fed. In our reading for today, the number is reported in verse 10:

*Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.*

How many were fed on that hill in Galilee? In Luke's gospel, like John's, the count—5,000—is given in the middle of the telling, when Jesus has the people sit. In Mark, the last verse of the story reads: "*Those who had eaten the loaves numbered 5,000 men.*" (Mark 6:44, NIV) In Matthew, the account of this miracle ends with this: "*And those who ate were about 5,000 men, besides women and children.*" (Matthew 14:21, NIV)

How many were fed? Five thousand? The 5,000 number is the number of men who were on the hillside that day. There were also women and children there. But, in Jesus' day, women and children were not counted because, sadly, in that time and place they didn't count.

Christiana de Groot is a professor of religion at Calvin College. In an article titled "Not Counting Women and Children," de Groot cites the work of sociologists who suggest that in a typical Galilean crowd, the ration of women and children to adult men would be 5:1 to 6:1. Five thousand men. A ration of women and children to adult men of 5:1 or 6:1. I'll pause so you can do the math. Including women and children, the number fed was likely 30,000 or 35,000.

But, in Jesus day, women and children were not counted.

We count people because people count.

When the women and children are not counted, the miracle is diminished. **When people are left out, God's miracles are diminished.**

In Jesus' day, women and children were not counted. But in Jesus' life and ministry, something new happened. When people began to bring children to Jesus and the disciples tried to keep them

from him, Jesus said, *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”* (Matthew 19:14)

In the new world Jesus initiates, there is a place for children. Children count.

We know the names of Jesus’ male disciples. In Jesus’ day, they were the ones who counted, they were the ones whose names were recorded and remembered. But Jesus welcomed women followers, as well. Despite the dominant patriarchy, the witness to Jesus’ inclusion of women breaks through the pages of the gospel:

- In Luke 8, where the women who followed Jesus from town to town are mentioned along with the twelve.
- In the naming of Jesus’ female friends: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Martha and Mary of Bethany.

In the new world Jesus initiates, there is a place for women. Women count.

Time and time again, what we see in Jesus’ life and ministry is a breaking down of barriers, to create places for all, to create places for you and for me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Who gets counted? Who counts?

These are not ancient questions. They are not questions relegated to biblical times.

At the core of the FORWARD plan, our congregation’s long-range vision, is that this place—our congregation, Birmingham and Berkley First—will be a place for all. That everyone—everyone—will experience in our midst a place of welcome. We are committed to living into our core value of welcoming all. This means that whoever you are, from whatever place you come, we want to make this a place for you. You count. It is the message of the blank spot in the center of our bulletin cover image. We want to be sure we create a place for all—for you.

Who gets counted? Who counts?

These are not ancient questions. They are not questions relegated to biblical times. And our wrestling with these questions is not limited to our life in the church.

I count 62 faces on the cover of our worship bulletin. In 1789, in the United States, only property- holding white males were considered full citizens with voting rights; they constituted 6% of the population. That would work out to just under four of the faces on the bulletin cover.

For purposes of counting population, article 1, section 2, clause 3 of our Constitution—what is referred to as the 3/5ths compromise—said that enslaved African Americans would count as 3/5ths of a person. It took the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments to our constitution to repeal the 3/5ths compromise, to expand voting rights to all male persons, and to prohibit states from denying the

right to vote on grounds of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” 1920, less than 100 years ago, is when the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was passed and voting rights were extended to women.

Who gets counted? Who counts? Are we seeing and including everyone?

Recently, I had a conversation with a retired woman who is in her seventies. She described to me an experience she had when she took her car in for service. The service on her car was not complicated. Yet, she sat in the waiting room for hours. In recounting the experience, she shared that it seemed as if younger persons, who were professionally dressed and seemingly employed, seemed to be having their cars serviced much quicker. She said to me, “I felt invisible in the waiting area. I am not sure the people at the facility to which I took my car thought my time—that I—was as valuable as others.”

Who gets counted? Who counts? Are we seeing and including everyone?

They are questions with which we still wrestle.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were 5,000 men—25,000 to 30,000 people total—on a hill. And they were going to be getting hungry. *“Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.”*

What do we make of the statement that Jesus’ question about how the people were going to be fed was a test? What was the test?

Was it a test of the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus was, of his divinity, his power?

Or was it a test of whether the disciples had been following Jesus and understanding the way in which he saw everyone? Could it be a test of their understanding of the new world in which Jesus was living, a world of radical inclusion, a world in which women and children and others who in Jesus’ day did not count, do indeed count?

It is Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, who says to Jesus, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish...”

A child. One not counted. One who doesn’t count. It is a child who is seen by the disciples. The disciples see the child; they pass the test.

It is a child’s gift that is placed in Jesus’ hands. **Thanks be to God for the gifts of one who is not counted. For we know what Jesus does with the child’s five loaves and two fish.**

If the child had not been seen, had not counted, would the miracle have occurred? What miracles might we miss if there is not a place for everyone, if all are not seen and counted?

\* \* \* \* \*

The news this week has been filled with images from the flooding occurring in North and South Carolina. When I see such scenes following natural disasters, I am overwhelmed. The scale of destruction is so immense, the need so great, what can any one of us do?

And when it is not natural disasters, the state of our common life often leaves me asking the same question. Healthcare, immigration, climate change...and stubborn attitudes all around that make the challenges appear insurmountable. What can any of us do?

**When it seems as if the only solution is for a miracle, what can any of us do?**

In his book, *Made for a Miracle*, Pastor Michael Slaughter argues that every miracle has two components, divine intervention *and* human initiative.

The Red Sea parted when Moses raised his staff and God parted the seas. Lazarus was restored to life...after Jesus called him from the tomb and the community removed the death clothes that bound him.

One who does not count—a child.

A gift—five loaves and two fish—that was insignificant in the face of the need: 30,000 hungry souls. **Human initiative.**

Jesus blessed it and broke it. **Divine intervention.** And the gift was more than enough. In God's hands, what we give, blessed and broken and shared, is enough.

In the face of overwhelming need, when the challenges we face are daunting, we can follow the example of the child in the gospel story. He did not worry about whether what he might offer would make a difference. Instead, he offered what he had. He was selfless in doing what he could. And Jesus did the rest.

What can we do? We can offer what we have. We can be selfless in doing what we can. And we can trust God to take our gifts to accomplish miracles beyond our imagining.

Mother Teresa famously said, "If you cannot feed a hundred people, feed one." And, trust in God's abundance. Trust in the other half of the miracle equation: human initiative *plus* divine intervention.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the end of the gospel story for today, Jesus tells the disciples: "*Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.*"

In the new world into which Jesus invites us, there are no scraps, no leftovers, no fragments, no broken pieces that are expendable. It all counts. We all count. Nothing given goes unused.

In this congregation, our commitment is that this be a place for everyone—that whoever you are, wherever you have been in life, whether you look like any of the images on the bulletin cover, or if your face is bruised, or scarred—you count. We are committed to making a place for you, because it is what Jesus does.

And this: not only are we committed to making a place for you, but we know that we will not be complete, we will not experience the miracles of God’s extravagant abundance, until we accept not only who you are but also the gifts you bring. To not welcome your gifts, to not invite you to be the human dimension in the miracle equation, is to do less than count you. What does this look like?

- It means working to develop more drop-in service days, that allow you to be a part of mission and service opportunities with whatever time and gifts you might bring.
- It means including everyone—including youth and young adults—in our generosity campaign. Because we need to affirm that everyone counts, and that every gift—every gift—can be used by God in ways beyond our imagining.
- It means being open—to you, and to those beyond these walls, who have God-given gifts, whether such gifts are valued and appreciated by our world’s standards. We give thanks and pray God’s blessing on all gifts, great and small.

One, two, three, four, five.... We count. You count. Regardless of what anyone may have ever said to you, regardless of how anyone may have treated you, you count. You matter. You are included. God has a place for you.

And as you live into this day, this week, what you offer—be it an encouraging word, a day of service, a financial gift; what you offer, though it may seem like no more than five loaves and two fish in the midst of 30,000 souls—what you have to offer, with God, can be enough.

There is a place for you. There is place for you to serve. With God, who you are and what you bring can be more than enough. Amen.

## References

Groot, Christiana de. “Not Counting Women and Children.” *Perspectives* (September 1, 2015). <https://perspectivesjournal.org/posts/not-counting-women/children/>

Slaughter, Mike. *Made for a Miracle*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017.