

September 11, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 15:1-11

Count On It

Just up the block from this church at the Mayfair Animal Clinic there's a poster of a dog with a look of patient conviction, a look of perseverance and expectation, a look, the look that dogs give you when they are sure you have something that you could give them. You could call it a dogged look. The poster says, "If you don't think dogs can't count, try putting three treats in your pocket and then only give the dog two of them." (I've got two dog jokes today, that might be the better one...)

As we walked up the block this morning for our annual Rally Day Parade, we didn't quite make it up to the Mayfair Animal Clinic, but we were counting. Before we even started the parade we were counting on the Confirmation students to hide sheep, paper and cotton ball sheep made by the Sunday School teachers. The teachers made the sheep, and the Confirmation students hid the sheep, so that the younger children could find the sheep, as in the gospel parable today. Although, in a reversal of the gospel, it was not just one lost sheep that our children went out to find, but 99--that's a lot of sheep those teachers made! Thank you teachers for making them, and students for hiding and finding them, for all the other wonderfully crazy things you all will do this year of Sunday School. Count on it—the Christmas Play is already being drafted.

The numbers are just one of the wonders of this parable: this shepherd has 100 sheep, but then one that is missing, and so the shepherd leaves the flock and searches until he finds that one, lost one. Wildly impractical, logically questionable, and incredibly moving: the shepherd's dogged search, the shepherd's perseverance and conviction, the shepherd's rejoicing return with the one that was lost, laid over his shoulders, moving, especially if you've ever been lost.

The shepherd's search is logically questionable, but from the very beginning of the parable Jesus takes it for granted that we would look, too, that we would do what the shepherd does: "Which one of you does not leave the ninety-nine?" Jesus asks, making it sound altogether obvious, "Which one of you does not leave the ninety-nine?" Jesus says, affirming, assuming that we would do just the same. "That's what you do," Jesus states, "you go out and look for the one that is lost; the one that is not with the flock." Do we do that? Or even more puzzling, how do we do that?

Or yet another thought-provoking question, suggested by a child: how did the shepherd know that one of the 99 was missing? The answer may seem obvious, simple, something a child could answer: how did he know one was missing? He counted. The shepherd counted his sheep. Every one counted. Every one mattered. When one was gone, he went out and looked for it. Or to put it another way: the shepherd was not content with the flock in a reduced state. The shepherd was intent, the shepherd is intent, upon what is missing. The shepherd is focused on what is out there, and what matters, what counts.

What is missing, for you? What is it you are looking for? What matters, what counts?

Demographers, people who count things like when people were born, and what people of similar ages have in common, demographers often describe flocks of people with particular generational titles. You have probably heard these terms and can find yourself in one of them. There are the Boomers, people in their late forties to late sixties. (We have some here who may technically belong to the generation prior, the Traditionalists, for the purposes of this sermon I'm

counting you as a pinch younger than that.) Boomers grew up with the promise of the American Dream and the post war growth, space travel, and the Civil Rights era. Then there is Generation X, people in their late twenties to mid forties. Gen Xers may have grown up taking care of themselves; perhaps both parents worked, divorce rates sharply increased; Gen X grew up while the U.S. lost some status as a world power and was rocked by political scandals. Then there are the Millennials, people born after 1981. A digital world is the only one they know; headphone jacks will soon be a thing of the past, the economy is expanding, the internet, the world is wide open, and yet Millennials are much more sheltered, and much more scheduled, than previous generations; Millennials come of age after 9/11. We reflect on that, today, too.

What matters, what counts, in this world that we know, this world we all know, in all different ways? At a gathering of pastors, someone shared a description of what each generation wants, what each generation is looking for: Boomers, a generation of moral authority, and concern to pass on legacy, value, Boomers are looking for what is true. Gen X, the cynics, the disaffected, Gen X are looking for what is real. Millennials, optimists and activists with flying thumbs and a flair for adventure, Millennials are looking for what is good. Boomers want what is true. Gen Xers want what is real. Millennials want what is good.

According to the generalizations of demographers, it sounded accurate to me—but also all too simple. I am more complex, you are more complex. Whatever our age, we are more complex than a generational tag. God is too. God is all of that and more. True, real, good—or as Jesus says: “the way, and the truth, and the life.” God is all of the things that count, to all of us, no matter our age. God is all that, and we can find it, when we follow him, for he is the good shepherd, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Sheep, it should be noted, are notoriously stupid animals. We can be like sheep, but we can be different, too. We don’t know if that one lost sheep in the parable was bleating, trying to make itself known. We don’t know if it crept out of its hiding place, it’s place of fear, when it heard the shepherd calling. We don’t know, the parable doesn’t say, but we can. We are more than animals. We have the agency a lost coin lacks. We can want to be found. We can reflect upon our situation, see the rescue efforts God is taking, and respond. We know that the Good Shepherd is searching for us, relentlessly searching, eager to rejoice with us. We can respond to his voice, and be counted among his followers.

My final bad joke (of this sermon): A farmer goes to market, buys a great big flock, sends his trusty sheepdog out to count them. “How many sheep are there?” the farmer asks. “100” replies the dog. “How can there be 100?” the farmer says, “I only bought 95.” “I know,” the sheepdog replies, “but I rounded them up.”

God is better at counting than sheepdogs and farmers, God counts even every hair on our heads. That’s how much we count to God. Be found, and round others up, too.