

*Who Counts?*¹

It's the title of the book we just read,
a retelling of the parables Jesus tells in Luke 15.

"Who counts?"

It's a question that raises ideas of numbers, as the book indicates:
the shepherd counts sheep,
the woman counts coins,
the father counts sons.

But "Who counts?" is also a question
about the value of something.
About something's—or someone's—
dignity and worth.

"Who counts?" is another way of asking
"Who matters?"

And "*Who matters?*" is the question plaguing the people
to whom Jesus tells this story in the first place.

"Now the tax collectors and sinners
were coming near to listen to him."

Jesus has this one group
listening to him.

This group of God's children is saying to Jesus,
"You eat with us and speak to us.
And what you say is good news for the poor,
And release to the captives
And freedom for the oppressed.
Tell us more."

And Jesus also has a second group
noticing him.

This second group is further out in the field,
looking on as people flock to Jesus' party-table.
"And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling,"
St. Luke tells us.

¹ The children's book referenced is *Who Counts?* by New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine and Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. <https://www.wjkbooks.com/Products/0664262740/who-counts.aspx>

“This *fellow* welcomes sinners and eats with them,” this second group complains.

“He *counts* sinners as his friends.

To him, sinners *matter*.”

It’s an astounding audience for Jesus, really.

These two groups, two assemblies of people.

The Sinners and tax-collectors close to Jesus,

whom we surely imagine as riff-raff and ne’er-do-wells.

The lepers and the lame, the criminals, the addicts.

And then the Pharisees and scribes further afield, watching.

Here are the religious, the elite.

Those who live put-together, upstanding lives.

Self-certified Good People.

Both groups within earshot

when Jesus tells a story

about who counts.

About who matters.

It’s a story about a father

who has two sons.

We often read the story focusing on the younger son,

with his wayward, wild phase,

a time when, we say, he is “lost,”

who then confesses and repents and receives his Father’s forgiveness

so now then is “found.” Some will say, “saved.”

You could say,

he matters.

In fact, he always matters. Then he was missing.

So his return

is cause for celebration.

With such a focus on the younger brother,

it is easy, then, to forget about the one who grumbles:

the elder brother.

Having seen a “sinner” welcomed, a repentant act *celebrated*,

he becomes angry

and refuses to go in to the party.

He and his resentment
 stand outside, in a self-imposed exile,
 while another—seemingly *less* deserving—enjoys the party.
 From the elder brother’s perspective,
 it seems the younger brother “counts.”
 He matters.
 Perhaps a bit
 too
 much.

When we read this parable,
 we love to play this game of determining
 who matters
 and *when* they matter (or don’t matter)
 and *why* they do or don’t matter.
 Younger brother? Or older brother?
 Obedient and faithful? Or prodigal and imprudent?
 The one who comes back? Or the one who stays?

But the truth of the story is what St. Luke puts right up front:
 This father has TWO sons.
 And the father wants and loves BOTH sons.
 Without one or the other,
 the family is incomplete.
 Both sons complete the count;
 both sons *matter*.

The same goes for BOTH of Jesus’ audiences.
 Because Jesus, like the Father, has BOTH groups.
 LOVES both groups:
 The archetypical “sinners”
 and the righteous religious grumblers.
 Without one or the other,
 Christ’s community is incomplete.
 Jesus counts both audiences;
 both groups *matter*.

To most of us, that sinners matter to Christ is obvious.

What's less obvious—and perhaps more radical—
is that grumblers matter too.

That is Good News, my friends,
because most days, I think we are way more likely
to be grumbling religious Good People
than story-book-style sinners.
Most days I think the church is much more like the self-righteous,
angry elder brother
 than the repentant, lost-and-found, younger one.
For while we are certainly the lost—
We are all sinners. Are all beggars. This is true—
we are also surely, occasionally the grumblers.

We are the Pharisees and the scribes;
the people who occasionally exclude those *we deem*—
 but whom God does NOT deem—
 as unworthy.

We are the elite, the privileged people,
the kinds of folks who want to celebrate ourselves
and our hard-earned accomplishments
 before the unearned, unmerited work of God's mercy
 among those we deem undeserving.

We are the good religious types, trying to lead The Good Life,
which means we also risk excluding ourselves in angry self-imposed exile,
refusing to join where the Father and the Son and the Spirit
are so clearly throwing a party
because we're not so sure about the people God's throwing it for.

So what Good News indeed
that the father has two sons
and wants BOTH at the party.
Like the Shepherd with 100 sheep,
like the woman with 10 drachmas,
like the dad with 2 sons,
God counts what God has made,
and God will not rest until the count is complete.
Until the bunch is full.

Until the group is whole.

Who counts?
 was the question that started this story.
 One answer is that God counts.
 God counts us.

Who matters?
 was the question before Jesus.
 And Jesus' answer is that
 you do. And you do.
 We do.
 Everyone matters.
 Which means that the ones we grumble against,
 they matter too.

No wonder the parable ends
 without telling us whether the elder brother went into the feast.
 The open ending leaves us with a great moment for self-reflection
 about whom we grumble against.
Who do you think doesn't count? the parable begs.
Who do you think doesn't deserve to be celebrated,
or doesn't merit a welcome?

Maybe you grumble against the generations below you;
 or the generations above you.
 Perhaps you mutter against the new neighbors moving into your area or local
 schools,
 the way folks say, "Our neighborhood *is changing.*"
 Seems like these days it's only grumbles exchanged
 from one side of the political spectrum to the other.
 And the church is not immune:
 maybe you grumble because you want the church
 to be a predictable place of comfort
 or because you desire it to be a prophetic voice for change.

The Parable of the Father with Two Sons
 expects this grumbling.

Jesus fully anticipates that we will divide ourselves;
 that we will either not notice when someone's gone missing,
 or not miss them,
 or keep ourselves from celebrating their return and our collective
 completeness.

The Parable then also becomes this grumbling's antidote;
 one story serving as both warning and remedy.

The Father has TWO sons;
 God counts everybody
 and God says everybody counts
 regardless of whether they get grumbled at
 or are the ones who grumble.

And that news—
 that truth—
 will change us.

It will free us.
 Because if we are angry grumblers,
 then getting God's invitation
 to come to the party,
 also means getting a changed attitude.
 A changed outlook.

Because joining God's feast
 means no longer fearing strangers,
 only welcoming friends.
 No longer having competition and enemies,
 but partners and companions instead.
 And that celebration
 is a place, a time, a Kingdom as it is in heaven,
 that remains incomplete on earth until
 we help God with God's business of counting
 and making sure
 that
 everyone
 counts.

AMEN.