

Sermon: Not Worth Counting

Year C, Christmas Eve

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#); [Psalm 96](#); [Titus 2:11-14](#); [Luke 2:1-20](#)

Offered December 24, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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One more day to Christmas! And if you are a kid in this room, you know *exactly* what I'm talking about. One more day to Christmas! And if you are a grown up in this room, you know *exactly* what I'm talking about. Christmas is a time to count things. Seven Swans a Swimming. Minutes in line at Walmart. Dozens of cookies for all the school, office, church, neighborhood parties. Trips to the hardware store to get the bushes, candles and inflatable snow globe on the front lawn all going at the same time. We count the things on our To-Do lists or the number of To-Do lists over all. In my family, starting at Thanksgiving, we count the number of south bound Christmas tree trucks on the Maine Turnpike. We've spent all those days counting things to get to this day, this Christmas Eve.

In those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered (Luke 2:1). The political scene in Israel in those days was kind of uncertain, with Rome exerting more control over the country around Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and all the local leaders were trying to show how capable they were of running things. So if Mary and Joseph were two of those things that the Emperor wanted to count, the local guys would get them on the way to Bethlehem.

It doesn't appear that anyone wanted to count the shepherds. They were still at work with their flocks. Being a shepherd wasn't considered a good job. You didn't have a settled home, you wandered around a lot, it was hard to do right by your family. It wasn't like being a carpenter, like Joseph. Everyone could use a good carpenter. Shepherds were a dime a dozen.

And isn't that always the way? Someone else decides what's valuable, based on something on the outside. In those days, if you were a man, you went into your father's profession. If you were a woman, you became a mom and a housewife. Maybe some of those shepherds and some of those women would have made great carpenters, or even great emperors, but they weren't going to get the chance to do that. The society they lived in in those days decided that they weren't important enough to count.

There are folks in our society that aren't very important, but we count them, at least sometimes. The mentally ill. The homeless. Those in prison. If I asked you who were the people in this world who didn't count, who were overlooked, many of you would probably come up with folks like that.

If I asked you who were the people in this world who counted, you would probably say political leaders and celebrities, heads of corporations, environmentalists — famous people, people in the news. But there are a whole lot of other people missing from either list. Many of us here tonight aren't on either list.

There are a lot of folks here, and we can all acknowledge that the church is rarely this full on other days of the year. No guilt. You are most welcome here at any time. But if you are here tonight when you are not normally here, it is probably because of someone else. You love them and want to make them happy. Perhaps it's someone long passed, who brought you to church when you were a little kid. My mom's mom always had tears running down her cheeks during

Silent Night. She's been gone 40+ years, and my mom and I will still tear up tonight when we sing that carol because our love for her.

Those people, the people who are not on anyone's list, those people are the ones we count. They are our parents and spouses, our coaches and teachers, our children and our friends. We count them not because of some category they fall into but because of who they are. They are awake at 11:00 at night making spice cookies because we said those were our favorites. They have made fourteen trips to the hardware store for extension cords because the only proper way to greet grandchildren is with enough holiday lights to get sunburned. They show us that we count to them.

So when did *those days* become *this day*? When did the people off the list, off any list, off every list, begin to count? *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord."* (Luke 2:10-11).

Jesus was born in that stable and *those days* of imperial control and being on the list because of a category became *this day* of great joy where all the people mattered because of who they were. Once Jesus grew into his ministry, he made it clear, again and again, that everyone counted, that we couldn't leave anyone out. He certainly meant the poor and the widows, the sick and the imprisoned. But he also meant the fishermen and the carpenters and the shepherds, the women and the rich men and the Roman soldiers. He said that everyone counted and he meant it.

He died on the cross, and really, the death of an impoverished teacher of non-violence in a backwater province in an empire long gone should not make any difference in our lives this day. But with his birth, life, death and resurrection, one thing that has changed in this world is that we are no longer allowed not to see everyone. In those days, Jesus was never going to be on anyone's list of people who counted. And yet because of his life, our world changed this day. This day there are always people we would prefer not to see, prefer not to count. Muslims, activists, addicts. Oh, there is someone we want to take off our list of people who count. But because we follow Christ we have to leave them on the list. As Christians, we don't just have to *live with* the long list. As Christians, we have to *live into* lengthening it.

Long before Jesus began speaking his earthly ministry, began saying that everyone counted, God spoke. God spoke to the shepherds, the ones nobody thought worth counting. God sent them into Bethlehem to see the babe and sent them back out into the world to tell everyone what they had seen. God sent them dancing and shouting out into this winter's night, when everyone counts. One more day until Christmas! One more day!