

## ***“HOW GOD COUNTS”***

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Bloor Street United Church

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – September 12, 2010

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***Reading:*** Philippians 4.4-9, Luke 15.1-10

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

Our scripture passages this morning have a lot to say about rejoicing. Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul tells us, and again I say rejoice. Then we hear of rejoicing in heaven and on earth over a lost sheep and then one little lost coin. Both the shepherd and the woman, after a long and tiring search, call together their friends and neighbours, saying, rejoice with me. The theme of rejoicing seems appropriate for a September Sunday on which we launch the new Council and the Sunday school and the new outreach program. (And lectionary and a pastoral care initiative and book club last week, and plans for our Craddock Lecture, and Holy Land Awareness Sunday.) Although we are sorry not to have David with us today, we rejoice to have our choir back in the chancel, and we rejoice to be having lunch together after church. It is a day to be glad together. To call in our friends and neighbours, saying to them, rejoice with me.

So we rejoice together – but what exactly do we mean when we say, Rejoice in the *Lord*? Most of us nowadays do not picture God in the way Luke’s story about Jesus does, as a great big person, seated somewhere above us on a throne and surrounded by angels. Indeed for many people, even church people, it is hard to *picture* the divine reality at all. We may have a sense of the mysterious power that underlies our every breath. And in many different ways, we have an intimation that in the very centre of reality dwells goodness and possibility. We intuitively know that human beings are

oriented toward this goodness, drawn to it. For some, this experience of the ultimate goodness of things is felt most forcefully in nature – in the woods or gazing at the stars – for others in passionate and compassionate relationships, in family love and human community. However it is experienced, the sense of God’s goodness has a magnetic quality. And we share in our Christian faith a sense of being addressed and compelled to action by this goodness – that it is more than a philosophical proposition, but somehow a personal calling. Follow me, says Jesus.

The astonishing metaphors we encounter in the Bible express the scope of this wondrous goodness. They give us a sense both of the grandeur of the divine reality, and of its intimate, personal character. Provided we don’t take them literally, these pictures tell us something about God. An attentive shepherd, a careful housewife, an eagle with young birds resting on her wings, a welcoming father. Or a great king, possibly even surrounded by angels.

However described though, the God of the Bible doesn’t seem to do arithmetic the way we do. We heard just a couple of chapters ago in our reading of Luke that in addition to keeping track of sparrows, God counts the number of hairs on each of our heads. Not just our heads of course, but the heads of every person flooded out in Pakistan, or in the mudslides in Guatemala, the heads of each child and woman raped in acts of war, the heads of the hungry and the overweight, of the forlorn and the foolish. In God’s arithmetic each one of these is known and considered infinitely precious. An attentive divine presence is mysteriously there with each one. Conscious of suffering, living through and breathing each painful breath with compassion and love. God counts in great detail.

Apparently God also counts time differently. We hear in a letter of Peter (2 Peter 3.8) that in God’s sight, ‘one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.’ Or as in the psalm, a thousand years of human history is ‘but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night’. All our geopolitical struggles, both our small advances in humanity and our horrendous lapses play out in a perspective that encompasses the eons of creation. Human life is like grass, flowering

for a season, then withering, then blown away. Our troubles and sorrows, just as our joys, are ephemeral. In this calculus of God's, the hateful Koran-burning plan that we heard about this week down in Florida is a blip on the screen. And so are the Crusades, and every other episode in which the rhetoric of religion has been used to attack God's beloved children and sully God's precious creation. Just a passing shadow.

And yet we can also see it the other way: in the 24 hour period of Islam's most joyous festival Eid-ul-Fitr, and Judaism's New Year, Rosh Hashanah, the odious book-burning event was cancelled, the violent protests against it in Afghanistan took place, the faithful celebrated all over the world (in tents in Pakistan), and the public misunderstanding about the possibility of a Muslim place of worship near the 9-11 ground zero site continued to unfold. Indeed, a single day does burgeon into a thousand years of human living. A day is a thousand years. A thousand years is a day.

God's strange arithmetic extends to meal planning – according to another earlier chapter in Luke, God's son believes that five loaves of bread and two fish will feed five thousand people. And he turns out to be right.

And then in today's lesson, that same son tells us that God counts not by thousands of years, or billions of stars, or trillions of hairs on heads, but by ones. One sheep. One coin. One of you. One of you. Each one unique. Each one valued and beloved. Don't worry about the overall total, says Jesus. Rejoice over the one you have found.

This of course is the problem the Pharisees were having with Jesus that day. The Pharisees were responsible people. They wanted their religion to prosper. In a difficult context, as subject people in the Roman Empire, they were looking for sustainability and success. They needed numbers. And solid folks they could rely on. They wanted responsible engagement in the issues of the day.

And this brilliant young rabbi from Nazareth, who might have been a leader in the restoration of the faith, wasn't really helping. He was spending his time and effort on tax collectors and sinners, eating and drinking, as we are told. People who were never going to build up the faith or pay for the Temple. People who were not going to improve the credibility of the Jewish leadership with the government. The concern of these elders was that instead of helping build up the viability of the faith, Jesus was making it look like a hangout for fools and lowlifes. He was jeopardizing the fragile standing that the Jewish religion had in Roman Palestine. So they were very unhappy with him.

And Jesus said to them, that is not what this is about. This is not about the prospering of the institution. Not about making a huge impact on the high and mighty. This is about being available, he said, about attentiveness and caring. That is what makes heaven rejoice.

As we begin our new church year, and as we reflect later today on the priorities and interests of the congregation, this is reassuring news. We don't have to impress anyone. We don't even have to save the church. Our call is to follow Jesus in attentiveness and caring and justice. Our call is to serve and love those we find, as God seeks them and sends them our way, and as God counts them. As God seeks us, and sends us and counts us. One. One. One.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen, Paul said, and the God of peace will be with you. Amen.