

HOW MANY MEMBERS?

This is a little story from the life of the great-great-great-great-great grandfather of Jesus. (You don't have to count the "greats"; I didn't.) King David, despite a few serious mistakes (we used to call them sins), is the greatest King that Israel has ever had. No contest. No one else comes close. Part of that picture is David's amazing prowess as a warrior. As far as I know, David never lost a fight, whether in individual combat or as commander in chief of his armies. And David was a superb strategist. Jesus was also a superb strategist, but serving a Kingdom not of this world. Jesus was, in my view of course, the greatest spiritual warrior we have ever seen.

As most of you know, King David lived a thousand years before Jesus. Sometimes we rattle off such numbers without letting their significance sink in. It's a different world between David and Jesus, just as it's a different world between Jesus and us. We run into assumptions and customs that make little sense to us, at first glance. And it's just as surprising that some principles have *not* changed. For instance, three thousand years ago, David knew that he had a better chance of finding mercy with God than he had of getting mercy from other human beings. Some of us know a few human beings who care about us. Hopefully we each know a few friends and relatives who would not want life to be more difficult for us than it already is. Some of them may even try to lighten the load, if they can figure out how to do that. They are a great gift to us – bringing support, caring, affection, understanding – and in some circumstances, they even work alongside of us. It is a great joy to find other humans who hold some of the same values and purposes that we ourselves care about.

But the truth is that the vast majority of evil on the earth – the vast majority of cruelty, injustice, anger, malevolence, indifference, hatred, harm – is coming from other humans, not from God. God is not a drunk driver. God does not steal from us or lie about us or try to maneuver us out of jobs. God does not torture us, though some still insist that God may do that later on. But there is no evidence; there is only their "say-so." In all probability, they are only projecting onto God what they feel themselves. In fact, God does not tell us to hate everybody who does not worship or believe as we do. Some *accuse* God of such things, but they make that up to suit their own ambitions. God creates this place with natural laws and principles running, and sometimes we get caught by earthquake, wind, or fire. But that is

HOW MANY MEMBERS?

a small percentage of the mayhem going on in this realm. Even that would do less damage if we would cooperate together instead of fighting each other. And God does not commit adultery, regardless of what the Christmas stories try to tell you.

So King David is wise to put himself in the hands of God rather than into the hands of men. Abraham's son (Isaac) is safer on God's altar than he would be anyplace else on earth. But God's son (Jesus) is in terrible danger in the courts of the most religious, ethical, believing, Bible-reading men on earth – every one of them sworn to be a “son of the commandments.” It is a hard story. But then, where do we think we are?

I am a human being. Can all of you trust me to care about you? Can I trust all of you to care about me? King David was right: trusting God is a much better idea. Maybe if all of us learn to trust and love God, we will have a better chance with each other. In theory, if Jesus calls us into His church, we will have a better chance with each other. So far my experience here on earth bears that out – at least part of the time – with most of the church's people. I hope your experience does as well. But we cannot control it all, can we? It is still best to put our trust in God and then hope for the best with each other.

Now to a minor matter for most of you, I suspect. Araunah the Jebusite owns a threshing floor. As the story unfolds, he realizes the King's need and graciously offers not only to give David the threshing floor, but to provide the sacrifices for the altar once it is built. Some see this as a ploy – a way to ingratiate himself in the eyes of the King. Or perhaps it is a formality, with Araunah fully expecting the King to reply as he did. I see no reason to doubt Araunah's offer. I suspect that it is gracious and sincere. It is often a pleasure to give for a worthy cause – and in this case, also to a worthy person. In any case, we do notice that David's reply is equally sincere. There is no way King David will come before the Lord with a sacrifice that has cost him nothing. He cares about his relationship with God; it has already been strained to the breaking point. So King David insists on paying the full price for this threshing floor and the oxen.

That brings us to the part that seems weird to us. What's the big deal about taking a census? It took Joab and his officers nine months and twenty days to accomplish the task. So what? It turned out that there were eight hundred thousand men in Israel capable of bearing arms and five hundred thousand men in Judah capable of

HOW MANY MEMBERS?

bearing arms. So what? That seems like important information to have. We take a census without any guilt whatsoever. We count the members of our church without any remorse involved. We even count up how many people come to church each Sunday. We have records of it going back for years. Does anybody know why? Is there somebody who thinks it matters? Do we count how many people thought it was a good experience? Do we count how many people learned anything important? Do we count how many people became more faithful to God because they came to church here?

We have already noticed that Joab did not want to take this census. He asks David straight out: “If it should turn out that God has increased your people a hundred times over, would that make you happy?” Joab has the temerity to ask. But after the census is completed, David is overcome with remorse. Why? What has he done wrong?

We expect our country to take a census every few years. Sometimes I hear comments about taking it more often. Sometimes I hear people wondering how accurate the figures really are after we get them. Never have I heard that we should feel remorseful about taking the census in the first place or suggesting that it was displeasing to God. In our world, people are gathering statistics all the time, for endless different reasons. If we ever thought about it, we would consider David stupid or irresponsible *not* to take a census. How else could he levy taxes? How else would he know how strong his army might be if some other nation attacked Israel?

As an aside, fast forward a thousand years: *“In those days a decree was issued by the emperor Augustus for a census to be taken throughout the Roman world.”* (Luke 2:1) Neither Quirinius nor Augustus seemed to have suffered for taking this census. I have suffered for it, because I sometimes mention that Quirinius became governor of Syria in A.D. 6, while Josephus tells us that the census took place in A.D. 6 or 7 and that it was not a census of “all the world,” but a census of the territory governed by Archelaus (ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea). Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, was banished to Gaul by the Emperor Augustus because Archelaus had all the faults of his father but none of his virtues. In any case, from now on this territory (Jerusalem and Bethlehem included) would be governed by a Roman prefect. And in order to levy taxes, they needed to take a census.

HOW MANY MEMBERS?

Why does that make me suffer? Well, because I know that Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. – one of the many inconvenient facts surrounding the birth stories we try to tell about Jesus. We know nothing about Jesus until He is approximately thirty years old. Pretending we do only gets us into endless contradictions, like a ten- or eleven-year gap (4 B.C. to 6 A.D.) between the story in Matthew and the story in Luke. There is so much solid and reliable information about Jesus that I think it is a sad blunder to mix it in with the fairy stories that invite people to take it all with a grain of salt. Jesus is no myth, and neither are His life, His teachings, and His death and Resurrection. If we get real and stay honest, Jesus transforms all of life. But part of the price for knowing this is letting go of the layers of pretense and make-believe that some people have tried to tack on to make it “more impressive.” Jesus does not need to be more impressive. He only needs to be taken seriously for who and what He really is. But sometimes humans forget how difficult it is to make things up without getting caught in contradictions, which sometimes later on come to light when more information is known.

Anyway, in today’s Scripture passage, there is no question about David’s remorse, and neither is there any question about God’s displeasure. The punishment is severe. Even though we suspect that David chose well among the three alternatives, still the punishment is severe. Finally it gets to be too much for David to bear, and he pleads with God: “Why punish the sheep? It is the shepherd’s fault. Punish me.” But punish him for what?

At the time of this story, King David is close to the height of his powers. It turns out that he has one million three hundred thousand potential soldiers to draw on if need be. But David can only know this by taking a census. What’s wrong with taking a census? In King David’s time, it was an act of disobedience, an act of mistrust: a statement that we are now going to rely on our own intelligence, our own resources, our own strategies – instead of trusting in God. In David’s time (and David *usually* believed it), going against an army of twenty thousand men with your own army of only ten thousand (Luke 14:31) had nothing to do with who would be victorious – if God was with you. That’s the faith of a shepherd boy who was willing to fight Goliath. David had often been outnumbered and had won the battles anyway. God was with him. But taking a census meant David wanted to know the mathematical odds. Taking a census meant David wanted to rely more on statistics than on the presence of God. The stakes were

HOW MANY MEMBERS?

getting higher now, so trusting the outcome because God was with him was looking scarier and scarier. In other words, David was wanting to move into *our* world, where everything is a numbers game – where everything is more a matter of statistics than it is of faith.

For the most part, we know that this is how the world works. If God was on your side, you might still manage to win against the Jebusites, the Hivites, the Canaanites. You might still be able to defeat even Egyptians, under special circumstances. This was not mere theory; it had often proved to be true, clear up to the time of the Maccabees. Unbelievable but true, those Jewish guerrilla fighters, at home in their familiar hills of Palestine, had proved too courageous for the vastly superior numbers that had been sent against them by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. So the legend of God bringing victory if you were just brave enough and faithful enough still lived on in the Zealot movement of Jesus' own time. And it ended up getting countless thousands of Jews killed to no purpose. The weapons, the armor, the training, and the strategies of the Roman legions were a different world from Samson or Gideon or even the Philistines of King David's day. In the early days of the Roman Empire, nobody stood against the legions of Rome. Nobody.

So increasingly (and some of you can tell me this better than I can tell you), attitudes have changed, reality has looked different, and statistics and strategies and the intelligent use of information have been morphing into a very different perception of what is possible and what is realistic ever since. Some assume that God has been more and more relegated to ethereal realms, with less and less bearing on the choices we make and the realities we face.

But for others, the spiritual realms and realities have come into clearer focus than ever before. Far from taking a backseat, the presence of God seems more real and looks more essential than ever. Where God goes out of the picture, the chaos and meaninglessness increase exponentially. Even so, it becomes ever more clear and difficult to find ways to live “in but not of the world.”

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HOW MANY MEMBERS?

Should we always rely on taking a census? Is there any way in which our constant determination to do statistical studies, count the numbers, rely on surveys, or play all of life by the numbers game is not the whole truth; not the only way to approach things; not the only way to see what really matters? Can we count noses and care about relationships at the same time? That is actually the formula for a good deal of modern advertising: work the statistics, but claim to be the warm and caring “family business” that still really cares about people.

Is there any way in which David was right to feel remorse about counting noses? I just thought I would ask. Back to where we live: How many members do we need? Even though most modern church members do almost nothing to bring any new members into the church, nearly every church member anywhere assumes that we need more members. In fact, most of the members of any church you have ever known just assume that we need all the members we can get. Why?

I am not claiming to be immune to such thinking. We have a hundred members on our rolls. I am grateful for nearly every one of them. But I am pretty certain that we need close to three hundred solid, covenant-bond members in this church to be effective and viable in our situation. Yet I am very aware that this is only the “propaganda of our age” talking. I never hear this in my prayers. Do you hear this in *your* prayers?

What I hear in my prayers is that we should be trusting the Holy Spirit far more than we do. We should be watching constantly for who *the Holy Spirit* brings here. We should be asking, in a spirit of willing obedience, for who the Holy Spirit wants us to talk to – for who the Holy Spirit wants us to invite. Have we ever noticed the difference between talking to somebody about joining the church because *we* think it would be a good idea, and talking to somebody about joining the church because the Holy Spirit has sent us to have that conversation with a person we actually know and care about?

In any case, the numbers are meaningless. Oh, not to the outer world. To the outer world, the numbers are practically the only thing that matters. If that is not the first question, it is the second question that is always asked: “How many members does your church have?” Does anybody ask: “How faithful are they? How much do they love each other? What are they trying to accomplish together? Are they more prayerful than they used to be? Do they love Jesus more – do they love God more – the longer they belong to your church?”

HOW MANY MEMBERS?

Would it surprise you to learn that I think this church fares far better in the presence of the real questions than it does in the light of the numbers-game questions? By the way, that is not a “sour grapes” comment. If you look at the statistics in the yearbook of churches of the Southern California-Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, this church looks pretty good. That is, by the statistics (that do not really matter) eighty-eight percent of the other churches of our Conference are not as well-off as we are. (There are one hundred thirty-four churches, and we are in the top sixteen.) I notice that, even though I do not think it matters. What matters is how faithful we are to God. And that depends on how much we trust God.

Even so, I remain hopeful that more and more we will care about and focus on who *God* brings here, even if sometimes God has to send us to go get them. Who God wants in this church is what really matters, and that’s all the members we will ever need. Let others do the advertising, put out the signs about “ALL ARE WELCOME,” count the noses, put special cards on the backs of the pews, and develop systems for keeping track of visitors. As for us: Back to our prayers. Back to obedience when the Spirit calls to us. Hopefully nobody who ever comes here will feel like a statistic, a mere nose, part of a numbers game. “From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride.” Maybe I’m just getting lonesome for Mariana, but I think this verse from “The Church’s One Foundation” is about a whole lot more than just counting sheep.