

Learning to Count to Eight

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Matthew 14:13-21

There is a cute little poem, by Valerie Cox, that tells of a woman who is traveling and making connections in some unknown airport. And because she has some time to kill, she goes and buys a book in the airport shop and a bag of cookies to enjoy while reading. She plops herself down and begins reading her book when a gentleman comes and sits down beside her. She notices after a couple of minutes that the man reaches into her bag of cookies and takes one. She thinks this rather peculiar. So she takes one. Sure enough, he takes another one, as does she. He takes one, she takes one. Back and forth they go. And with every cookie this man takes, she grows more and more incensed. Until there is only one left. She wonders what this rather rude man is going to do with just one cookie left. Sure enough, he reaches into the bag, pulls it out, breaks it in half and offers one-half to the lady and eats the other half. She is now just about beside herself. Listen then how the poem concludes:

*She had never known when she had been so galled,
And sighed with relief when her flight was called.*

*She gathered her belongings and headed to the gate,
Refusing to look back at that thieving ingrate.*

*She boarded the plane and sank in her seat.
Then sought her book which was almost complete.*

*As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise,
There was her bag of cookies, in front of her eyes.*

*"If mine are here," she moaned with despair,
"Then the others were his and he tried to share."*

*Too late to apologize she realized with grief,
That she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief.*

Has there ever been a time when you wished you had trusted yourself less? Has there ever been a time when you discovered that your view of things, as sure as you

were that it was the right view, turned out to be the so, so very wrong view? Has there ever been a time when the opinion you formed of a person or of a situation – as clear as you were in your determination – you discovered later that you could not have been more off the mark?

Each one of us, I can imagine, can think of someone in our high school class that got picked on a bit; some nerdy kind of guy that in the social strata of high school was just not amounting to anything. Loser, we called him. And, of course, at the 25th reunion we discover that the Loser turned out to be a Winner. He had discovered the cure to fifteen diseases and is soon to be on the cover of Time magazine, and no thanks to you. You missed it. You just didn't see him for who he was.

Tom Dempsey grew up with half a foot, ridiculed by just about every kid who came his way. What possible thing could Tom Dempsey do with half a foot? Loser. The only thing he could do is kick the longest field goal in NFL history – 63 yards. One of the most enduring records in sports.

It's amazing, isn't it, how eager we are to trust our own view of things?

Years ago, I remember walking into a convenience store and seeing a bunch of kids just hanging out and it looked like they were up to no good. "There's trouble," I thought. "I wonder what will become of them?" A week later I was asked to pray at the local Boy Scout Court of Honor and saw one of those kids proudly holding up the American flag, all dressed up in his uniform, his Eagle Scout medal pinned prominently. How eager we are to trust our own view of things.

Now before you start thinking that this is going to be a sermon on how we should give up all semblances of common sense and not seek to apply our logical and analytical minds to the affairs of the world, let me assure you that is not the message I want to leave you. God gave us brains to reason, to discern and to analyze. It's best always to remember that $1+1=2$ and that for every action there is a reaction. And yet the truth is our brains, our eyes and our common sense can sometimes betray us. Because they are not as pure as we want to think they are.

Francis Bacon put it this way: "The human mind resembles those uneven mirrors (you see in the amusement park), which impart their own properties to different objects ... and distort and disfigure them."

It's best to not always trust your own view of things.

So Jesus is out there with his disciples. Jesus has just received some very bad news. His cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, has been beheaded inside the courts of Herod. This is greatly discouraging. John was one of the good guys. He was family. He had everybody's best interests at heart. But now he's been murdered. And upon receiving the news Jesus retreats to a deserted place by himself. And when Jesus retreats he prays. He communes with the creator. Because you see when you get news like this, devastating news, it's news like that that can affect your view of things. It can make you grow cynical or grow indifferent. To say maybe, I don't care; to say maybe, no point in being a good person because it doesn't get you anywhere. And so maybe to guard against such distortions of view Jesus retreats and has a conversation with the Creator. To gather up once again the Father's view of the world -- the Father's view of his mission. To remember, perhaps, that God still so loved the world.

So maybe it explains that when Jesus came upon the great crowd, the crowd of likely 10,000 people ... when Jesus came upon the great crowd, he didn't say, "Oh, go find yourselves another Messiah, go find yourselves some other do-gooder to abuse, go find yourselves another prophet to behead." No, Matthew tells us that

when Jesus saw the crowd he had compassion for them. He didn't trust his own view, he trusted the Father's view. He had compassion for them. He healed them. He taught them. He loved them.

He loved them all the way until it was evening, and when it was evening it was the disciples who put to use their analytical minds and surveyed the expanse of the crowd, calculated the position of the sun, and with loving and compassionate hearts said to Jesus, "Best now to send these folks away so they have time to get to the village and get some dinner in them."

And then Jesus zings them with this line: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

Excuse me? Ah, Jesus, we got at least five thousand men out there not counting the women and children. Really? "You give them something to eat," Jesus says.

"But we have nothing" the disciples say. "We have nothing but five loaves and two fish."

"We have nothing but ..." Do you hear the distortion in that sentence? We have nothing ... but. You have to trust our view on this Jesus. We have nothing. We've got five to ten thousand people out there and we have 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 pieces of food here. Jesus, don't you see we have nothing?

So Jesus asks for the five loaves and two fish ... 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 ... and gathers them together and takes them into his hands. There is an eighth element. And now the seven become eight. Eight is when you take the seven, the "nothing", and put it into the blessed

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imagination of God. Into the blessed imagination of God. Jesus lifts the seven to heaven and blesses them. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 and after lifting them to heaven and blessing them, he broke the loaves and gave them back to the disciples. And the disciples began their distribution and all ate and all were filled and when dinner was over it was time to collect the leftovers and they had, scripture says, twelve baskets left over.

Those disciples were so sure that they had seven. They counted seven. Five loaves and two fish. And five loaves and two fish. Seven little pieces of food do not feed five thousand. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 ... they were so sure of their view of things. But Jesus with his blessed imagination counted eight. And with eight, you can feed an army. With eight, you get leftovers. With eight, you start to see miracles. Flip the # 8 over and you get the sign of infinity. It's just that one extra that seems to make the difference. It's this eighth element that when introduced into the equation changes the math.

You see, the disciples had only learned to count to seven. They had only learned to add up demand and subtract supply and that was the answer. Economics 101. Nothing more basic than that. True, that is when you've only learned to count to seven. It's when you can count to eight, it's when you can start to believe that your view is not necessarily the only view present, it's when you begin to take what you have and lift it to heaven and say, "What do you think? What's your view? What do you imagine we can do with these things?" It's only then that you can begin to see what's really there ... what's really, really possible.

In the middle of Teheran, there stands the Golestan Royal Palace, the home of generations of kings and shahs. And I am told that as you walk into the grand entrance of this palace you are greeted with the overwhelming sight of glittering, sparkling glass. You swear that the domed ceilings and walls and columns are covered with diamonds. But upon close inspection you can see that they are small pieces of mirrors. And these fragmented pieces of mirror reflect the light in a million different ways such that you swear you are inside a crystal palace.

But as the story goes when designing the palace this was not the original plan. The original plan had been for mirrors, solid mirrors to be hung from floor to

ceiling, wall to wall -- which in itself would have been amazing. The mirrors were ordered from France and sent. But they shattered in route. And when they opened the crates in Teheran all that came out was broken pieces of mirror. And so the builder wired the architects and said, "We have nothing. We have nothing but a bunch of broken glass." And just before they threw it all away one architect began to imagine and wondered if they could fit all these little pieces of mirror into a mosaic of glass upon the walls and ceiling ... what might that do? And so they did it and they discovered something even more beautiful.

"We have nothing, but ... We have nothing, but ten million pieces of glass." Is that all you can count to? What about ten million and one?

So Peter the disciple goes to Jesus and says, "How many times do I have to forgive my brother? Is seven times enough?" And Jesus says, "Try counting to eight. And to nine. And to ten. Each time give it over to me -- these attempts at forgiveness -- give them to me and let me see what I can do with them.

Seven days the good book says, it took for the good Lord to create. Seven days and included in those seven days was a day of rest. And so that's how we set up the human rhythm...the human cycle of time. Seven days. And that seventh day was left to ponder the blessed imagination of God of what God might do with what we've done. The seventh day was the day to hand our time to God and God's blessed imagination. What might you do with what we've done? We count seven days and we say it's not enough. Not enough days in a week. And the good Lord says, give it to me because I'm in charge of the eighth day.

Did you know that we (that is the world community) have the potential of feeding every single human being? Not one person in this world has to go hungry. The problem is we can only count to seven.

The world has the potential of eliminating every single nuclear weapon on the face of the globe. But we've only figured out how to count to seven.

The world has the potential of ensuring that every single child gets vaccinated and gets an education. But we're only counting up to seven.

We have the potential of cleansing the continent of

Africa from the scourge and epidemic of AIDS (the crisis of our time) if we can only figure out how to count past seven.

There is no limit to the blessed imagination of God.

We saw some of that yesterday. A few of us gathered up some loaves and fish, put them in some backpacks and on the Day of Hope outfitted 250 children for school. And that was just one day. One day of hope. Every day gets to be a day of hope when you give your "seven" to the master and he turns it into eight. We just have to trust ourselves less and trust the blessed imagination more.

One of the prayer books I use invites the supplicant into a time of confession and does so with these words:

"Ask forgiveness from the Lord for the moments in which you did not respond to his love. Don't be afraid to ask for the great gift of a growing sense of your sinfulness, a growing sense of wonder that you still have time to change, a sense of joy and gratitude that you have been guaranteed the victory through Christ, (and this is the part I especially love) a deeper mistrust of yourself and a more profound trust in God."

"A deeper mistrust of yourself and a more profound trust in God."

Oh my friends, what gifts we have for the world. What gifts we have for the world if we could just trust ourselves less and trust our Father more.

More losers might become winners. More troublemakers might become Boy Scouts. More hungry mouths might become fed. More guilty souls might be forgiven. More dying people might become well.

If we would just trust ourselves less and trust our Father more. If we could only learn from Jesus how to count to eight.



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Church of the Palms

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