

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
February 17, 2019
Title: The Expectant Crowdⁱ
Scripture: Jeremiah 17:5-10
Luke 6:17-26

Everywhere Jesus goes, he seems to attract a crowd. Last week, the crowd was pressing against him trying to get close and almost forcing him to get into a boat to avoid being pushed into the water. Today, we find him once again with a great crowd. He is in a large field or a level place with a crowd that includes his disciples and also a “great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

Do you like being in a crowd? Typically, I don't. Quite frankly depending upon why the crowd is assembled, it can scare me. I am sometimes afraid that a crowd might turn violent and that I might not be able to escape safely. Studies have shown how people react and behave differently in a crowd than they would individually. There's even a term for some of this, we call it “crowd or mob mentality”.

When a person becomes part of a crowd there is a certain degree of anonymity. There is a freedom to act as though the people in the crowd don't know each other because they often don't. So, a person may treat someone in the crowd the way they wouldn't if they were alone with the person.

The behavior of a crowd can become emotional and sometimes impulsive. All we have to do is watch a political rally to see how a crowd can be stirred up to become emotional. We have seen how people can behave in a crowd in ways that they probably would not if they were alone.

But in today's gospel, the crowd around Jesus seems to be different. This is not a crowd that is angry or unruly. Bishop Ernest S. Lyght – a retired UM Bishop, - describes this as an “expectant crowd”.

He says that this crowd is filled with anticipation. They knew that Jesus had healed sick people and they wanted to be with him. Some of them wanted to be healed of physical ills and they were eager to try to touch Jesus. Luke says that when they touched him, power came out of him and they were healed.

Some of them wanted to hear comforting words. Some with troubled spirits simply wanted to be made whole. They came from near and far. They came because they thought that Jesus would empathize with them. They came open to the possibility that through his teaching, Jesus might lead them to a new way of living. They came wanting to be welcomed into the doors of Jesus' ministry. They came expecting something to happen, anticipating that their lives would be changed by being with Jesus.

Isn't that really why we come to worship on a Sunday morning? We come hoping, expecting, praying that through our prayers, hymns, music or sermon, we will hear something that speaks to the deep needs in our lives. When we are hurting, we come seeking comfort.

When our lives are turned upside down, we come wanting to know that we are not alone, that God is with us and walks with us every step of the way. We want to know that others care and will help support us. We come hoping and praying that we will hear or experience something that gives us the hope, strength, and courage to keep getting up every morning, to walk into the unknown knowing that we are not alone.

When we are seeking direction and purpose in our lives, we come hoping that God will speak to us in a way that helps us to see some new

ideas, new possibilities for our lives. Sometimes we come seeking a word, a teaching that will help us make sense of our world and show us how to live more fully into the lives God has offered us. When our lives seem to be going well, we come to give thanks and praise to God, and to simply worship and feel close to God. Sometimes we come with a mixture of these.

Just like the expectant crowd gathered around Jesus, we come from many different places, with different needs. We come hoping, believing, that being together in worship will feed us and send us out renewed and ready to face our lives outside of this place.

To put a slightly different spin on a United Methodist phrase, they came to Jesus with “open hearts, open minds, and seeking open doors”. I’d like to believe that this is true for us as well.

Jesus met with them on a level area – he was able to make good eye contact with at least some of them. He could read their faces and their body language. He accepted them as they were.

The thing is, though, that even though Jesus always walks with us, and always accepts us as we are, there is always an invitation to move to a different place, a different attitude or a different set of actions. There is always an invitation to take that next step, whatever it may be, that makes a difference in our lives.

One of those next steps when we follow Jesus is that we discover that we are required to see God in places and ways that are different than the world’s priorities and perspectives.ⁱⁱ Much of the world sees blessing in things that are primarily material in nature, things that signify status and success as defined by the world. But God’s priorities are not the same as those of the world.

This was good news to those who were listening to Jesus that day. For the most part, they were people who were poor. They were people who did not always know where their next meal was coming from. They lived under the oppression of the Roman government. They lived in a culture that often saw poverty as punishment for sin. Jesus' words were scandalous and also words of liberation and hope to them.

For the most part, we are not in the same situation as the people who were listening to Jesus that day. While many of us may not be wealthy as the world judges that, we are also not poor by the standards of most of the world. Most of us can go home and find something to eat for lunch and for other meals after that. So, when we hear this passage, we may find ourselves focusing not on the blessings but on the woes and that can be scary.

As I was struggling with this passage this week, I found myself asking, "How do I make this palatable to a largely middle-class congregation?" because quite frankly I'm uncomfortable with parts of it. Immediately, I also felt guilty, like I was denying what the passage said, denying what Jesus said, so I went running back to the commentaries to try to understand this passage better.

In Matthew's gospel, the similar passage, that we know as the Beatitudes tends to spiritualize these words more. In Matthew's gospel for instance, it says, "Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness" whereas Luke's gospel simply says, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

As I read more, I was reminded of the challenges in translation from one language to another. William Barclay notes that when Jesus say, "Woe to you who are rich because you have received your consolation", the

word he uses is the word for receiving payment in full. Barclay suggests that “what Jesus is saying is this, `If you set your heart and bend your whole energies to obtain the things which the world values, you will get them – but that is all you will ever get.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

I confess that this fits much better with my overall understanding of scripture. When we put this passage with other passages of scripture, the bigger picture that emerges is that Jesus never says that there is anything wrong with having money or security. The danger is when those things become our gods; when they become the reason for what we do, when they become more important than being open to and following God’s will.

Having financial resources can make it possible for us to do many things of value to God’s kin-dom. Having security may mean that we are able to speak for those for whom speaking would be dangerous. There is no blessing or woe in either poverty or wealth by itself. I understand the blessing or woe to relate more to what we do about it, and where we place it in relation to God’s will. “Will we concentrate on the world’s rewards? or Will we concentrate on Christ?”^{iv}

The reading from the prophet Jeremiah reinforces what Jesus is saying. The people had indulged in idolatry and Jeremiah warns them against trusting in mere mortals rather than in God. He proclaims that turning their backs on God’s teaching and guidance will place them in a desolate wilderness – both spiritually and literally. It is very easy “to rely on our own human wisdom and the advice and example of others who appear strong and successful”. It is also very dangerous.^v

Jeremiah proclaims that those who trust in the Lord will be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. In a land where water and shade are precious resources, this is a powerful and wonderful image

for what it is like to live a life in the arms of God. In this region, mirages are common, but “unlike a mirage, God’s truth is sure and fast. Blossoming with green leaves, deeply rooted beside the stream of life, those who trust in God have no fear of the heat of the noonday sun. Persons who walk by faith receive nourishment to sustain them in hard times.”^{vi}

Isn’t this what we need to hear in our complicated daily lives? Trusting in God rather than in people who appear to have the answers, power, and influence makes a huge difference for our lives. Trusting in God rather than what the world proclaims as success and security is what really matters.

Jeremiah goes on to remind them that the image that we present to the world and the truth of our hearts can be contradictory. He proclaims that God can see into our hearts and discern the truth that we cannot hide behind pretty church clothes and winning smiles. Because of this, we cannot and should not judge the heart of another person. Only God can truly see our hearts and the hearts of those we might judge.

The crowd came expecting Jesus to teach them, heal them, comfort them, fill their spirits. We come with those same expectations and God does not disappoint.

At the same time, we are reminded that there is another crowd beyond our walls – there are other people who have the same needs we do. There are other people who need to know about God’s love. There are others who yearn for a word of comfort, who desperately want to know that they are not alone when they face the difficulties of life.

They may or may not be an expectant crowd – they may not expect that there is good news – although they may desperately be hoping that there is. One of the important questions for us is are we open to all

persons who want to hear a word from God? Do we truly welcome all persons whether they are similar to us or very different?

This week, 864 delegates will gather for a special session of General Conference and will be grappling with this very matter as it relates to sexual orientation. Bishop Lyght writes, “Like Jesus, we are called to accept people as they are and to strive to develop a Christian relationship with them. Not only did Jesus heal people, he also taught the people. Jesus perceived their unexpressed needs. Looking into the eyes of his disciples, he taught them about the many ways in which they were blessed. God will bless the people in spite of their status when they align themselves with Jesus.”^{vii}

The good news for us today is that Jesus understands our needs whether they are obvious or more hidden. Jesus understands our needs even when we may not yet understand them. Jesus continues to teach us that we are blessed in many ways and these blessings have nothing to do with the way the world perceives what is good and of value. Following Jesus is not about popularity. It is about living the truth that Jesus teaches us.

“Just as God seeks us, Jesus wants us to seek God with open hearts, open minds, and open doors. Surely, God wants us to see all of the people in the crowd and to minister to them” with integrity and faithfulness. If we are willing to look, we will be able to see all the people that God sees.

ⁱ The title and some thoughts come from General Board of Discipleship “See All The People” worship theme for Epiphany Part II. Bishop Ernest S. Lyght.

ⁱⁱ Abingdon Preaching Annual 2019, p.19

ⁱⁱⁱ Barclay, William The New Daily Study Bible – The Gospel of Luke. P.91

^{iv} Ibid

^v Wingeier, Douglas E, editor. Keeping Holy Time, Year C. p.88.

^{vi} Ibid, p.89

^{vii} Lyght, Ernest,S. Bishop.