

Lec 13B, proper 8, June 30, 2024

Ps 30, Lamentations 3:22-33, 2 Corinthians 8:17-25, Mark 5:21-43

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Today Mark takes us into a hectic scene on the shore of the sea of Galilee, where a crowd has gathered, a crowd of people hungry to touch and see Jesus. He has been traveling from one place to another, teaching and proclaiming; yet at every turn he is interrupted by people desperate for healing.

Crowds are a distinctive feature of the gospel of Mark, an unstable presence. They are a dramatic demonstration of Jesus' compelling ministry. People are drawn to him by the stories of his amazing deeds of exorcism and healing. But that attention is dangerous—as the crowds grow larger so does the opposition of religious leaders who fear Jesus' authority and influence.

Sometimes the crowds themselves are dangerous, even life-threatening. Often, Mark describes them as “pressing in”—words used twice in our reading today—pressing in, so that Jesus is at risk of being crushed. Once, he has to get in a boat and teach from the water. Often, we hear that Jesus is fleeing from the crowds—going to a deserted place, taking refuge in a house, getting in a boat and going somewhere else.

A crowd is not a community. It is a gathering of people, mostly strangers to one another, who come together for some temporary purpose. Often, crowds gather for a spectacle—a sports event, a concert, a display of fireworks, a chance to get a glimpse of a celebrity. In our own time, think of the record crowds at Taylor Swift concert's—96,000 wildly enthusiastic fans, three nights in a row. Sometimes, crowds gather to make a spectacle of themselves—a political rally or demonstration, where people come together to say with their bodies that they support a candidate or a cause. Recently in the news, encampments in support of Palestine, over a thousand of them. Sometimes, crowds gather to worship, as we do here, as thousands of young people will do in the Youth Gathering in New Orleans in a couple of weeks, and in the news recently, that huge crowd, 1.8 million people determined to get to Mecca, where over a thousand lost their lives in the intense heat.

Crowds can be dangerous simply because of the mass of all those bodies— where people may be crushed and trampled if the crowd suddenly moves. In a crowd, people are stimulated by the presence of so many others, and emotions are heightened. Crowds are unpredictable— susceptible to sudden enthusiasms and outbursts of violence. Thousands of excited spectators welcomed Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. A week later, that crowd turned into an angry mob yelling, “Crucify him.”

And yet, the crowd is also a space of possibility and freedom—a place of open access and boundary crossing. In crowds, very different kinds of people come together. More often than any other place, the crowd is the setting of Jesus’ public ministry—he teaches and heals in the middle of huge gatherings, outdoors and open to all.

The crowd by the sea of Galilee includes both a synagogue official and an unclean woman—two people who could not, would not, have come together except in a crowd.

The synagogue leader was probably uncomfortable in this crowd, out of place. And yet Jairus comes boldly through the crowd, driven by anxiety for his daughter. He reaches Jesus and falls at his feet—begging for help, in front of all those strangers.

The crowd follows, “pressing in.”

In that crowd, the hemorrhaging woman makes her way toward Jesus. She doesn’t dare approach Jesus directly. Bleeding for years, she would have been ritually impure—shamed and outcast. She’s tried everything the doctors have to offer, spent all her money, and gotten steadily worse. She slips into this crowd with one last desperate hope—to touch Jesus’ clothing and be healed. In the crowd, she sidles up to get close to Jesus and furtively reaches out her hand, touches his cloak. Probably, she was planning to slip away as the crowd surges forward.

But Jesus turns around, stops to look over the crowd. As she had hoped, touching Jesus’ robe has healed her. And it has done more—it has affected

Jesus, who is “immediately aware that power had gone forth from him.” So he turns and asks, “Who touched my clothes?”

The disciples are impatient. The answer is obvious: “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”

But this touch is different. For Mark’s Jewish audience, it would have been scandalous—polluting. To be touched by someone who is unclean makes you unclean. But instead, this touch establishes a connection that is almost like an electrical current. Power goes from Jesus to the woman—healing power. They both feel it.

“Who touched me?” Jesus asks.

And one in the crowd knows what he means. She steps forward, “in fear and trembling.” She has already been cured of her disease. Now she is healed of her shame—healed by falling to her knees and telling the truth.

Jesus calls her “daughter” as he blesses her and sends her off.

Then others come with a message for Jairus—yet another interruption. They inform him bluntly, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’ Jesus shakes off the crowd and goes to the house, taking the little girl’s parents into the room where her body lies. “Little girl, get up,” he says, and with those words he reunites this family that had been separated by death.

As we hear these stories from Mark, we ourselves have gathered to find Jesus, in this crowd. We come as spectators and participants. As skeptics and witnesses. As insiders and newcomers. We come to share the energy of worshiping and praying and singing with others. We come with open hands, to receive Jesus’ own body and blood. We come here, sometimes, with aching hearts and troubled minds. Maybe sometimes you have come to hide in the crowd; like the hemorrhaging woman, you don’t want to be seen—don’t want people to know that we are bleeding. But no matter why you have come today, or whatever you bring, it is already known to God—as you are fully known, and fully accepted, just as you are.

We stand in need of healing this day—healing of our wounded bodies and strained relationships; healing of our divided nation; healing of our violent and devastated world.

In this gathering, Jesus turns to us. Calls us to fall to our knees and tell the whole truth. To follow him into the wounded places of this world, where he is already at work to heal the resentment and anger of those who feel left behind; to drive out the fear that separates us; to bring peace to this war-torn world.

We come here on Sundays to join the crowd—here at St. Paul and part of a much bigger crowd, gathering all over the world to receive what we are—the body of Christ, blessed and broken.

So come to the table, taste and see, touch and be healed.