

Crowds at the Lakeshore
July 19, 2009
Psalm 46 Mark 3:7-12

Jesus' impact is not in the form of entertainment; His impact is in the form of an all-embracing love that never lets us go!

The place to begin is with the scripture lesson which serves us the backdrop for this second window. It is from the Gospel of Mark, and like so many other stories in this Gospel it is lacking in detail. There is no grand introduction. There is no dramatic preparation designed to get you sitting on the edge of your seat. There really is no plot, full of thick embellishments. There isn't even a hint of what it is Jesus is saying... No quotation from the Old Testament, for example. There is no exploration of why this great crowd is following Him except in verse 8, where Mark takes extra effort to describe it this way: "hearing all that He (Jesus) was doing, they came to Him in great numbers. From Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Tyre, and Sidon. He instructs the disciples to put a boat in the water from which He might teach and preach." This boat is not so much symbolic as it is a practical answer to a problem. The gathering crowds had begun to press upon Him so hard, to such a large extent that they almost crushed Jesus! The Story then concludes with His being called the Son of God by unclean spirits – to which He said: "Be Silent!"

But one thing is clear! Both in the passage and the window – they come to Jesus in droves! In multitudes! They come from all over, responding for different reasons to His reputation and power. Some came out of ordinary curiosity. Others seek His presence out of desperation of some kind or another. Still others come having witnessed people set free by His uncommon touch. They came in record numbers and the only means of crowd control is a boat anchored a little ways off shore. They come, the people do, and jam the shoreline with wall to wall humanity. To what might we compare it? To the wall to wall people in the streets of Teheran, Iran. In protest of a rigged election, out in record numbers because of their outrage! We don't know the precise words of Jesus, nor do we know exactly what He did – One thing we do know, the turnout is amazing. The numbers of people go on and on.

Consider the window itself (the bulletin cover doesn't represent it well – too light). If you look carefully you can almost see an energy between Jesus in the boat and the other people. Their longing, their love for Him, what He has to say, what He might do – is tangible. It's as though Charlie Lawrence – the artist took a snapshot, a single photo – from a series of photos of the Jesus movement. And he has seated Jesus in the boat. His body is in tension, almost like Rodin's sculpture – The Thinker. His right hand is raised as a gesture. Other Rabbis especially would understand it as a gesture of debate. While Jesus steadies Himself with His left hand – he raises His right as though He is underscoring a new point. Is Jesus repeating the Beatitudes? Blessed are poor in spirit, for they shall see God! Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God! Or is He proclaiming a parable,

one perhaps never recorded, but full of grace and truth? Or is Jesus imagining a new Pentecost where the Holy Spirit would bring together neighbors from the entire Mediterranean World? Perhaps I am reading too much into this simple scene. Maybe we see him at the end of a long sermon – and He is challenging the people: Come Follow Me! Come Follow Me! Come Follow Me!

The more I examine this window the more my imagination tells me that the essence of Jesus Christ is nothing less than the power, the infinite power of divine love. I examine this scene from Mark, and I see Jesus offering the world what no other figure can offer: an experience of Holy love which is impossible to deny! Think about it: there are those in the crowd who are hungry and thirsty: He loves them. There are those in the crowd who are troubled: He loves them! There are those in the crowd who are disturbed: He loves them! There are those in the crowd who are lost: He loves them! There are those in the crowd and are weak, sick, rejected: He loves them! There are those who pretend to be strong and delude themselves into thinking the neither need no want Him: He loves them! There are those standing on the shoreline who are self-assured, arrogant, who fail to see their need for anything but a larger ego: He loves them! There are powerful who look condescendingly upon Jesus, as if he does not matter: He loves them. There are powerful people, suspicious people, looking on from the shoreline. They ridicule Jesus with their contempt, their scorn. He loves them even though they know not what they do! He loves them all, each and everyone in the crowd – because they are like sheep without a shepherd. All are gathered on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee to witness what this Jesus of Nazareth says and does. They are there because He loves them with an everlasting love.

Walter Wangerin Jr. – a Lutheran writer from northern Indiana described a God-moment in His ministry at the Grace Lutheran Church, an inner-city congregation where as pastor he was the only white person in worship as a rule. In the 2nd year of His ministry the organist, Miss Joselyn Fields fell sick. In spring doctors diagnosed cancer. In the summer it had spread. By autumn she was dying. Walt visited regularly. He confessed that he did not always know what to say. He wore out the Psalms. He prayed often that the Lord's will would be done, ever though Walt was scared to tell the Lord what that will ought to be. One day, after a dreadful surgery, Walt tried a different strategy. He was determined to be cheerful, to describe the flowers he had seen on his way to the hospital. He spoke almost flippantly of the day she would return to her piano. Joselyn fields could only take so much. She raised a boney finger to Walt's face and with strain in her voice said: "Please, shut up!"

Walter Wangerin confessed that it was the best instruction he had ever received in the care of the sick. His words had lacked sincerity. He said: "I who had thought to give her the words she did not have, was in fact taking away the world, the only world she did have! I had been canceling her dignified dance with death." Not long thereafter – the next time he entered her hospital room, he said nothing. He simply sat and waited Afternoon shadows lengthened and he still sat there, saying nothing. Then he turned to his parishioner dying of cancer and said "I love you". Joselyn widened her eyes and held out her emaciated arms to say: I love you, too! Walt Wangerin claims to this day that it was

not him, nor her, but the Holy Spirit who spoke. The Holy Spirit of God who cuts through our smokescreens and trivializations to speak a word of love – for in such a circumstance that’s what matters! That’s the only thing that matters!

This Jesus in the boat has something important to say to us. This window is a reminder about why we are here, and why we are in business as a church. I look at this window and it invites me to rethink what really matters most in this life and the next. We need to rethink how we represent Christ to the multitudes who, like us, still need Him. The Christ of this window calls us to love a world even when this world will not or cannot love us in return! The Christ preaching and teaching in the Sea of Galilee draws people with His love – a love that never dies. The crowds on the shoreline had an ache, a profound need and desire for Jesus. They gave Him their brokenness. He gave them back their lives made new. If we fail to capture that same love, our evangelism – our recruitment – our outreach will always be less than it should be.

A parent of teenagers in one of the congregations I served was keenly attentive one Sunday when the topic for the sermon was the 23rd Psalm. Her teenagers had been anything but cooperative – they were rebellions beyond belief! She had enough feelings of failure to dig a hole of hopelessness deep and wide. Her older child had been in so much trouble that she wondered if he would ever grow up! Psalm 23 – is a song we usually recite at funerals, when there is death. How would a parent of impossible children receive these words? The sermon reinforced the notion of “being there” of how God “is there” for us. So that we can simply “be there” for others!

The words went forth like this: you may not have had the best answer for every family question, but you were there! You may not have given perfect guidance, but you were there! You may not have settled every dispute exactly as it should have been settled, but you were there. The second window in our sanctuary reminds us of our place in the crowd who follow Jesus to the edge of the water. This window in all of its simplicity reminds us of the enduring witness of the Christian Gospel. In following Christ we discover a word of Grace amidst our perplexities. A word of freedom in the midst of our tyrannies. A word of love in the middle of our forsakenness. Such is why the crowds are lined up as far as the eye can see! Christ is simply there for us, promising to love us into a life made new.

Tom Chappell and his wife Kate and their children found life in the suburbs of Philadelphia empty. So they packed up and departed, seeking something new. They drove to southern Maine where they set up modest housekeeping. A friend loaned them \$5,000 and they threw themselves into a business developing natural home and health care products. They had their fair share of failures, what one analyst described as their stumblings. Never the less, they were determined to offer the world products that were clean, sensible, and safe. They did not realize at first, how their toothpaste brand would catch on with others who were seeking the same thing. Pretty soon Tom’s of Maine toothpaste caught on, becoming a household name. Amidst a fickle market they became a success. Kate wrote these words: “Both Tom and I have a strong sense of paying attention to what is calling us. That’s been true in all other aspects of our lives. We try to

be reflective and prayerful. If you allow it - the spiritual become an important voice that you listen to..." Eventually, Tom returned to Harvard Divinity School, likening his trip from Pennsylvania to Maine to a spiritual journey, which it was. He remains convinced that it was God's call which summoned him and Kate and children. A call which they could not ignore... a call of everlasting love!

I don't know where you find yourself today. You may be amongst the proud – standing on that shoreline with an excessive ego – in need of Christ's love. You may be amongst others – desperate, fearful, burdened by chronic anxiety. Nevertheless, we are all in need of His love. You maybe in the crowd longing to hear Jesus call your name, loving you with a love that will never let you go. The truth is, all of us are there in some way or another. All of us are standing on the shoreline – hungry and thirsty for the amazing grace of the savior of the world. When we finally hear His address to us, it is as though the heaviest burden in the world has been lifted from our lives.

Jesus departed with His disciples to the Sea. A great multitude from Galilee followed Him. Hearing all that He was doing, they came in great numbers.

They followed, for the same reason we follow. Love so amazing, so divine – demand my soul, my life, my all! Amen.

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