2/10/19 The Pressing Crowd Rev. Amy Haines

Lk 5:1-11 Scout Sunday

When you hear the word crowd, what comes to mind?

The crowd at an OSU football game or a rock concert in The Shoe

The crowd of paparazzi and autograph seekers surrounding celebrities or athletes

The crowd of scouts in the mess hall when it’s time for lunch

When I looked up the definition of a crowd, the word can be both a noun and a verb. As a noun it means “a large number of people gathered together, often in a disorganized or unruly way”

-Oxford Dictionary online

That sounds a bit like the crowds I have been a part of at concerts and sporting events, Kings Island and Disney, and even at camp. I often consider those crowds organized chaos.

Crowd can also be a verb, as in “to press or stand close to”

-Merriam Webster Dictionary online

This definition reminds me of the media surrounding Tom Brady at the end of last week’s Super Bowl. Did you see that disorganized throng of media personnel and photographers pressing together, jostling for position, moving ever closer to Brady to get that best shot or that first interview? For a moment I thought Brady’s security team was going to have to start pressing back against the crowd for fear of Brady being crushed in the middle.

Throughout the Gospel stories, Jesus is often found surrounded by crowds. So over the next four weeks in our worship, we will ponder the makeup and emotions of those crowds, where we find ourselves in those crowds, and what we can learn from Jesus to reach out to the crowds that surround us.

Today’s crowd story actually begins in chapter 4 of the Gospel of Luke. There we find the stories that describe the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. First, Jesus was tempted to win the crowd over with signs and wonders, if only he would worship the devil rather than God Almighty. He refused.

Then, Jesus traveled to his rural home region of Galilee, and word of his teaching and preaching as one with authority began to spread from house to house and town to town until crowds began to follow him around from synagogue to synagogue.

This is kind of like what we do when we become groupies of certain singers or groups or teams and make an effort to see them in person in multiple locations on their tours or during their seasons.

The first crowd not to like Jesus, ironically, was his hometown synagogue. There he was known as Mary and Joseph’s Son. How can you listen for truth coming from a well-known yet unlikely source? The crowd was so upset in Nazareth that the religious leaders tried to have Jesus killed.

Yet Jesus’ ministry in this region was only beginning. He taught and preached at the synagogue. He began to cast out demons and proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom ways here on earth. The crowd following Jesus continued to grow in numbers.

I imagine there was a wide variety of people in these crowds near Jesus. Curiosity seekers. Skeptical religious leaders. Men and women and children. Old and young and in between.

As the crowd grew beyond the synagogue, as we will see in the weeks ahead, the diversity in the crowd also grew to include the faithful and the outcast. The hurting and the yearning. Those desperate for some good news from God and those desperate for hope in the midst of everyday life. Jesus clearly saw all of the people who made up the crowds that surrounded him.

One day, when Jesus was walking along the lakeshore, the ever-present crowd began to press in on Jesus, even before he ever made it to the synagogue. They were eager to hear the word of God articulated by Jesus in a way that made it real and gave them hope that God still cared for them.

As the crowd began to press in on Jesus, his solution was to get into a small fishing boat found on the edge of the lake, have the boat’s owner row just a little way from shore, sit down and teach the people from there. We may think Jesus sitting to teach is strange, but that was the way of the rabbis then. No standing behind a pulpit. Rather they were seated in front of the people.

Jesus moving from synagogue to lakeshore reminds me of John Wesley, an 18th century preacher that moved from preaching in the Anglican church to which he was appointed to preaching outside where the people were. Wesley was known to preach along the roadside near the mines, and once even preached while standing outside on his father’s gravestone, since he couldn’t be kicked off the family grave.

Imagine this crowd standing on the shoreline, eager to listen to the word of God as told by Jesus. Imagine if you were part of the crowd. Would you be pressing in to intently listen to Jesus, or would you be standing on the edge, wondering what his kingdom of God message is all about?

All of us have had teachers we loved and teachers we didn’t like so well. Many of us have stories of teachers who brought alive their subjects by the way they taught, their tone of voice and their passion. When I was in high school one of my favorite teachers was my English teacher, Mrs. Holbrook. She had a way of engaging us with the text. Yet contrast her to one of my English professors in college, whose name will not be mentioned, whose voice was so monotone when he taught I always struggled to stay awake in his class. Ever had one of those teachers?

Jesus was not like that. He was described as one who taught with authority. Who passionately proclaimed the kingdom of God and retold the stories of what we now call the Old Testament in ways that reminded his hearers who and whose they are. Jesus did not simply teach what had been handed down to him. Instead, Jesus shared new insight into the story of God’s redemption of God’s people. Jesus shared good news of the kingdom of God now present in this world, and called everyone he met to be a part of such kingdom work. Not only did he preach and teach, he also called people to live by faith in the midst of daily life.

And that brings us to the story of Jesus’ first encounter with Simon Peter.

Simon was a net fisherman, minding his own business, when Jesus appeared along the shoreline followed by a crowd. Imagine Simon’s surprise when suddenly Jesus boarded one of Simon’s boats and asked to be taken slightly offshore in order to teach the crowd. Simon obeyed, and moved from the shoreline to shallow water, then listened to Jesus teach the crowd. If I were Simon, I would have been biding my time until I could get back to work. Only, once Jesus was done teaching, he was just getting started with his ministry.

Jesus looked at Simon and told him to go back out into the deep waters and let down his nets for a catch. Now Simon had just returned from a long night of fishing where he had caught nothing. As the fisherman looked at the carpenter turned rabbi, I imagine his first thought to Jesus’ words might have been, “Are you nuts?”

And even though common sense told him to go home and get some sleep, even though his experience as a fisherman told him that the fish would not have moved in that quickly, Simon obeyed Jesus. He rowed out to deep water, let down his nets, and then experienced the catch of a lifetime. So many fish were caught that another boat was called in to save Simon and his boat mates from drowning. The catch was so large that it almost broke the nets from both boats.

After listening to Jesus’ teaching and then experiencing such a miraculous catch of fish,

Simon realized that this rabbi named Jesus was no ordinary man, and immediately fell at his feet. Simon cried out, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

But Jesus replied to Simon, “Don’t be afraid. From now on, you will be catching people.”

This was Jesus’ call to Simon to follow as one of Jesus’ disciples.

And Simon, James and John immediately left everything, including their boats, their families and even the catch of a lifetime, to begin to follow Jesus.

These ordinary, rural fishermen were not originally part of the pressing crowd surrounding Jesus. Instead, Jesus came to them, unannounced and unexpected, and they trusted Jesus enough to join the crowd and follow him.

You are I are not commercial fishermen. Yet Jesus still calls us out of the crowd today to follow him, and use what we know best, use how we have been gifted, to share the hope and love and good news of Jesus with others.

Simon was called to catch people. This is not like the catch and release of pole fishing. This is not catching people into a forced belief or rigid doctrine. Rather, this catching people is living by example, living out in word and action what it means to love God and love neighbor. Rather, this catching people is to share through story what God has done and continues to do.

Simon knew that his greatest catch of fish ever was not because of anything he had done.

Those were the same nets in the same water from just a few hours ago when he had caught nothing. No, Simon knew his greatest catch was God’s work, not his own.

And so catching people is more about sharing our story of God’s story in our lives.

Catching people is like the old phrase, “faith is caught more than taught.”

*Scouts*, consider how you best learn to do something. Do you learn to start a fire by reading instructions or by practicing? Do you learn to put up a tent by simply watching another person do it or by trying it yourself? What badge requirements have been a struggle for you until you were shown what to do by someone with more experience?

If you have ever been around young children, consider how much they learn by imitating those around them before they are ever able to read. I learned to walk partly by holding onto and playing with my great-grandmother’s walker. Kids will imitate the way we walk and the way we talk.

Parents of teenagers, your teens are watching to see how faith is integrated into the midst of your daily life. They are watching to see if we practice any spiritual disciplines. They are watching to see if we care for others or make fun of others. They are watching to see if we are the same person on Sunday morning as Wednesday afternoon as Friday evening.

The crowd surrounding Jesus was listening and watching to see if Jesus lived what he proclaimed as the ways of God in this world. If God loves us all, did Jesus welcome the women and the outcast? If God wants us to pray, did Jesus take time away from the crowds to pray?

If God is a God of redemption, did Jesus show us how to forgive ourselves and others? Jesus did all that—and more—living out what he taught.

Where do you find yourself in the crowd? Part of the crowd that is eager to press into God’s Word and ponder the love, grace and hope God offers to you today? Or part of the crowd that wants nothing to do with Jesus, nothing to do with faith, rejecting the impact of faith in Jesus on the lives of countless believers who have gone before us?

No matter where you find yourself in the crowd today, know that Jesus still sees you. Jesus still loves you. And Jesus still calls you, regardless of whether you are pressing forward or pressing back.

Boy Scouts are called live out duty to God. Girl Scouts are called to live out service to God. Yet today we are reminded with Jesus’ call of Simon Peter that our relationships with God through faith in Jesus is more willingness than duty, more compassion than service. Our relationships with God through faith in Jesus is all about moving out of the anonymous crowd into a deep, intimate, ongoing, everlasting relationship with Jesus.

Jesus invited the disciples, invited the crowd, and invites us here today, to follow him and learn from him, to not be afraid to live by faith and share our stories of what God has and can and will do.

We can learn from Jesus today that he cares for us to hear God’s Word. Why else would he have stopped to preach along a lakeshore?

We can learn from Jesus today that disciples can be ordinary imperfect people. Jesus didn’t call the brightest and the best of the religious leaders to follow him. He called honest, hardworking fishermen and even a despised tax collector. No matter how we label ourselves, as bright, dull, smart, struggling, hardworking, lazy, faithful or skeptic, Jesus calls us to follow. I commend to you our Lenten online study on Simon Peter to readily recognize how Simon was just like us, and if God could use him, God can use us.

We can learn from Jesus today that he calls us into the deep waters of life, and is with us in those deep waters. Living by faith is not an easy journey. Notice throughout the gospels how the size of the crowd around Jesus dwindles as the call to faithfulness increases.

Scouts consider how your requirements get harder the farther you go in rank advancement.

Notice how the number dwindles of scouts making it to each rank. Anything worth doing, however, is worth doing well, and often won’t come easy.

That is true in life and that is true in faith. Faith is not easy street. Following Jesus does lead to the cross—and through the cross to an empty tomb. Faith is not a checklist of requirements, but a relationship with the One who will guide us through the hills and valleys of life without a road map.

As you go forth today, remember Jesus’ words to Simon Peter— “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid to be part of the crowd pressing in eager to hear God’s Word. Do not be afraid to venture apart from the crowd when called to follow Jesus, wherever that faith journey will go. Do not be afraid to live by faith, hope, and love, following the example of Jesus. Do not be afraid to share your story of God’s story in your lives.

Fellow members of the crowd, do not be afraid. God is with us. Let us pray.