2/17/19 The Expectant Crowd Rev. Amy Haines

Lk 6:17-26

When have you ever been part of an expectant crowd?

Maybe you were part of such a crowd during Black Friday shopping, when everyone is hopeful to get the best deals.

Maybe you were part of such a crowd in a hospital waiting room anticipating the birth of your first grandchild.

Maybe you were part of such a crowd at a graduation ceremony, where not only were you excited to see your loved one walk across the stage and receive their diploma, but you were also excited to listen to the keynote speaker that day. Former parishioners of mine once had a daughter who graduated from OSU on the day that President Obama was the commencement speaker. While they grumbled at how early they had to arrive to pass through security, they were also grateful for such a rare opportunity for their family.

Maybe you’ve been part of an expectant crowd at a concert. First the eagerness for the doors to open to the venue, then the eagerness for your favorite musicians to begin, and finally the eagerness for the musicians to play your favorite tunes. For my birthday 2 years ago my sisters and I attended a Pentatonix concert. I squealed like a teenager when the first song of the encore was finally my favorite song. I had expected them to sing it and I wasn’t disappointed.

Throughout our lives, and often throughout our weeks, we will find ourselves in a variety of crowds. Some may be expectant, and others impatient. Some may be upset, and others mellow.

When we gather for worship on any given weekend, what is the mood of the crowd around us? Are we welcoming, or are we aloof? Are we engaging, or are we skeptical? Are we complacent, or are we expectant?

If we believe ourselves to be expectant, what are we expecting? A safe space to simply be? A connection with God’s family? A word from God? An encounter with our living Savior? Or an hour wasted?

Think about the many crowds found in the stories of the Bible. There is the crowd at Babel, seeking to be like God. There is the crowd in the desert, mumbling as they follow Moses out of Egypt. There are crowds on battlefields. And crowds gathered in Jerusalem for worship.

Throughout the Gospel stories, Jesus is often found surrounded by crowds. Throughout this month in our worship, we are pondering 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.

Last week we encountered Jesus preaching to the crowd from Simon Peter’s boat on the edge of the lakeshore, as the crowd was pressing in on Jesus. They were amazed at the way he taught, and wanted to hear more. We were then invited to press in ourselves, to listen and respond to Jesus’ call on our lives to follow him.

Today, we encounter an expectant crowd. They are hopeful. They are eager. They anticipate something happening while in the presence of Jesus.

As Jesus’ ministry expanded, so did the crowds around him. Jesus had begun his ministry in the rural region of Galilee, in the small towns and villages of that region. Yet as he began to teach in the local synagogues, word of his teaching with authority spread. Then Jesus began to heal as well as teach, and word of his healing spread.

By the time of today’s story, not only were men and women from Galilee part of the crowd surrounding Jesus, but now the crowd also included men and women from all Judea and even the great city of Jerusalem, as well as men and women from the coast of Tyre and Sidon. Luke calls them a great multitude, those who had traveled for hours and even days to be in Jesus’ presence.

Why do you suppose they were there? If you were part of the great multitude, why would you have gone to follow Jesus?

Personally, I think they were all yearning, yearning for something deeper, yearning for some connection with the divine. The Law had become such a checklist that few if any could keep all of the commandments. The Law had lost its heart connection, that of being the beloved children of God.

So I imagine many in that crowd were like many of us present today. They came to hear God’s Word. And yearned for it to be shared with power and authority. They came to be seen and welcomed, to be valued as a beloved child of God and welcomed as a member of the community of faith. They came to be healed. Body, mind and spirit. And they came to experience being in Jesus’ presence. They had heard he was different. Now they wanted to experience Jesus for themselves.

On this particular day, the crowd was waiting for Jesus to return from the mountain nearby, the place to which he had retreated for a time of prayer. Following that time of prayer Jesus had chosen 12 from among his followers to be his disciples, chosen 12 to journey with him and learn from him the ways of the kingdom of God in this world.

After calling the disciples, Jesus came down from the mountain with them and stood on a level plain. No more being alone on the mountain. No more being apart from the crowd in a boat on the lakeshore. Now Jesus was once again surrounded by the crowds pressing in around him, eager and expectant for his word and for his healing.

The crowd surrounding Jesus were not unruly; rather, they were hopeful. And in the midst of the anonymity of the crowd, many even dared to reach out to touch Jesus, or get close enough to be touched by Jesus, for healing power was emanating from Jesus. Some were healed physically. Others were healed of unclean spirits. Jesus had and still has the power to heal us body, mind and spirit.

Scott Hoezee once shared that this crowd around Jesus reminded him

…of video clips from Robert F. Kennedy’s 1968 presidential race—people everywhere were desperate to touch Bobby.  His aides reported that after many campaign appearances, Bobby’s hands would be bloody from scratches even as the ends of his shirt sleeves would frequently be in tatters.  Everywhere RFK went, he was greeted by a small sea of outstretched hands.

-Scott Hoezee 2-11-19 cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters

Jesus looked around him, and he saw the people in the crowd. He saw their eagerness and their desperation. He saw their hopefulness and their struggles. He saw their faithfulness and their yearning.

I imagine Jesus also knew, as the crowd around him swelled, that not all were ready to follow God’s kingdom ways. I imagine Jesus also knew that not all could be healed in the way they desired.

And so, in the midst of such a crowd, Jesus began to teach his disciples. With the crowd listening in. Yet what he began to teach, this expectant crowd was most likely not ready to hear. I wonder if the disciples were even ready to hear. And I wonder how much we are ready to hear.

For what Jesus began to teach was God’s kingdom ways, ways that are at odds with human society and also human nature. These are the same kingdom values we pray for each week when we say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Do we pray that prayer expectantly? Do we desire for God’s ways to become our ways?

Jesus introduced some of God’s kingdom ways by declaring a series of blessings and woes.

Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who weep now, and who are hated.

Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing, who are spoken well of by others.

You may know these words better by their title from the Gospel of Matthew- the Beatitudes.

Yet here they begin what is often titled the “Sermon on the Plain” in the Gospel of Luke.

Blessed are you… Honored are you…

And woe to you… Cursed are you…

Do any of these describe us here today, those of us who live in a middle class American society?

Is what describes us the blessings or the woes? These are all so countercultural to much of what we encounter on a daily basis.

Blessed are you who are poor.

You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all.

God’s kingdom is there for the finding.

Blessed are you who are hungry now.

You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry.

Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal.

Blessed are you who weep now.

You’re blessed when the tears flow freely.

Joy comes with the morning.

Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out,

every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me.

What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort

and that that person is uncomfortable.

But woe to you who are rich.

It’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you’ll ever get.

Woe to you who are full now.

It’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself.

Your self will not satisfy for long.

Woe to you who are laughing now.

It’s trouble ahead if you think life’s all fun and games.

There’s suffering to be met, and you’re going to meet it.

Woe to you when all speak well of you,

when you live only for the approval of others,

saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them.

Your task is to be true, not popular.

-taken from *The Message*

Why does Jesus start his teaching of his disciples with these words, in the midst of such an expectant crowd? If you look at the entirety of the Gospel of Luke, these words are really part of an overall message of God’s kingdom ways that are entirely different than the world’s ways.

That message began on the lips of Mary, the mother of Jesus, when she proclaimed through song:

…My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.…

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

That message continued when lowly shepherds and foreign astrologers were invited to worship the infant Jesus.

Jesus proclaimed such a message in his hometown synagogue when he read Isaiah 61 and stated it would be fulfilled: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

And as we continue in the Gospel of Luke we will see story after story of Jesus truly seeing and welcoming all in the crowd around him, including the poor and the outcast, women and children, even Gentile and Samaritan. Jesus offers to all the good news of God’s grace. Then and now.

Today’s blessings and woes are part of God’s kingdom ways. Redeeming those whom the world looks down upon. Challenging those lifted up by the world.

Yet this is not a simple checklist for us of what to do or what not to do. Jesus is not calling the rich to suddenly become poor, but to recognize that the rich often struggle to put their faith in God rather than in material things. Jesus doesn’t want to see any of us reviled or excluded, yet knows that often that will become the reality if we follow God’s kingdom ways in the world.

In the comfort of my air conditioned home, driving my dependable paid off car, in a city with water and sewage treatment, with enough money to give my kids a decent life, I must confess that Jesus’ first teaching to all of his called disciples is not what I expect or am still ready to hear today.

And yet, if I am going to follow Jesus as a disciple, then I need to be eager to listen to God’s word and ready respond to the grace of God in my words and actions. Even when living by faith is hard. Even when living by faith is countercultural. Even when living by faith is opposite of the world’s values.

Jesus’ words are not a checklist for us to do, but they do call us to recognize God’s kingdom ways in our midst, and live in such a way to share true blessing with one another, the blessing of grace.

May we learn from Jesus today to truly see, welcome and value one another-the poor and the rich and the in-between, the invisible and the excluded and the honored.

May we learn from Jesus today that God’s kingdom ways are already present all around us, if we are willing to look for those God moments in our lives.

May we learn from Jesus today to not be afraid of the struggles in our lives, for often in our struggles is where we learn to trust in God rather than the material things of our world.

Often in our struggles is where we learn what truly matters in our world, and the values by which we live. Often in our struggles is where Jesus meets us with his welcoming arms and his healing touch.

May we learn from the crowd today to be expectant-

To believe God continues to be present with us

To hope for God’s redeeming and transforming love to be a part of our lives

To eagerly press into God’s Word

To expect faith to change us.

May we continue to live in expectancy, and in hope.