

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
July 21, 2024

## **Disciples in the Crowd**

Mark 6:45-56

Today's text begins and ends with a crowd. It opens with Jesus dismissing the thousands whom he and his disciples had fed, and closes with people flocking to him, bringing him the sick in need of healing. And the crowd in Gennesaret certainly wasn't the last one. Mark says that wherever Jesus went—villages, towns, or countryside—people recognized him and did whatever it took to get within range of him, even if that meant just touching the edge of his outer garment. Wherever there was Jesus, there were crowds.

These crowds take on a life of their own. They become key actors in the unfolding story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In fact, it would be hard, if not impossible, to tell the story of Jesus without telling the story of crowds. They bear witness, in their own unique way, to the presence of God and his power at work in the world.

As the crowds gather around Jesus, he teaches them, feeds them, and heals them. Of course there are also moments when Jesus needs to get away from them. It's wonderful that the crowds can experience and receive the power of God through the ministry of Jesus. But there are times when Jesus withdraws from them in order to reconnect with the source of his authority and power, through solitude and prayer. Jesus removes himself from the presence of the crowds and puts himself in the presence of the Father, far from all the curious minds, hungry stomachs, and broken bodies. Just as the crowds need Jesus, so he needs the Father.

Without these retreats into the presence of God, Jesus' ministry might end up being shaped more by the demands of the crowds than by the expectations of the Father. The wants of the crowds are important, but the will of God, and the power to do it, are what matter most. So when Jesus goes to the mountainside to pray, he's refreshing both his strength and his identity, because who he is and what he is doing are determined by more than just the number of people who seek him out for instruction, nourishment, and healing. He's more than just the size of his crowds. He's the beloved Son of God.

Crowds can be a tricky and dangerous thing. They can cheer you on or chase you away. They can surround you with support or send you packing. They can receive you or reject you. They can be your ticket to success or your route to ruin. This can be just as true in the church as anywhere else. In his book *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson comments on the way that church leaders often look to crowds as a source of ministerial significance and purpose:

Classically, there are three ways in which humans try to find transcendence—religious meaning, God meaning—apart from God as revealed in the cross of Jesus: through the ecstasy of alcohol and drugs, through the ecstasy of recreational sex, through the ecstasy of crowds. Church leaders frequently warn against the drugs and sex, but, at least in America, almost never against the crowds. Probably because they get so much ego benefit from the crowds.<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus looked at the crowds around him, he didn't see a sign of his popularity and a boost for his ego. Instead, as Mark says, Jesus "had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (6:34). This statement, from the story of the feeding miracle right before today's text, probably draws on Old Testament themes and imagery. The prophets had often criticized the kings of Israel for taking advantage of the people and failing to act as shepherds. Ezekiel had promised a new age in which God would shepherd his people. In the feeding miracle, Jesus presents himself as the people's shepherd. His compassion for the crowd took precedence over his concern for his disciples and for himself. So he responds to their plight by teaching them many things, and then by challenging his disciples to feed them. The size of the crowd leads the disciples to believe that this is impossible. When they basically tell Jesus, "We don't have it in us," Jesus asks them what they do have. And when they offer him their modest resources, Jesus satisfies the whole crowd, with food left over. The crowd is great. The need is great. But the power of the Savior is also great.

Just over a decade ago, aerialist Nik Wallenda, who professes faith in Jesus Christ, walked a tightrope across Niagara Falls as well as a high wire across the Grand Canyon. Opinions differed as to whether Wallenda's daredevil feats were acts of faith or unnecessary attempts to court danger, though he was certainly doing plenty of praying. Part of what grabbed my attention, though, was what Wallenda wrote about what he sometimes does after the event. He engages in what he considers the simple spiritual discipline of walking where the crowds have just stood and picking up trash. Wallenda said,

My purpose is simply to help clean up after myself. The huge crowd left a great deal of trash behind, and I feel compelled to pitch in. Besides, after the inordinate amount of attention I sought and received, I need to keep myself grounded. Three hours of cleaning up debris is good for my soul. Humility does not come naturally to me. So if I have to force myself into situations that are humbling, so be it .... I know that I need to get down on my hands and knees like everyone else. I do it because it's a way to keep from tripping. As a follower of Jesus, I see him washing the feet of others. I do it because if I don't serve others I'll be serving nothing but my ego.<sup>2</sup>

Where there's a crowd, there's the risk of pride and an inflated sense of power. Jesus knew plenty about power. The power to teach. The power to feed. The power to heal. Even the power to walk on water. In between the crowds on both ends of today's text, Jesus strides across the watery surface on a mission to be with his disciples. Just as they had faced a seemingly overwhelming situation, thousands of hungry stomachs, so now they once again find themselves up against something beyond their resources and skills. This time they're overwhelmed by a stormy sea, by wind that works against them.

Naturally the disciples are afraid and confused. Confused enough to mistake Jesus for a ghost. But he reassures and comforts them. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (v. 50). As with the feeding miracle, so here, we need to hear Jesus' words against the background of the Old Testament. The Greek words translated "It is I" can also be brought into English as "I am." This is the way God describes himself when he reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14). It's the terminology Jesus uses several times in the Gospel of John to identify himself as the "I am" (John 8:24, 28, 58). His words "Fear not" echo divine reassurances in other parts of the Old Testament where God manifests himself.

Then there's also Mark's note that as he walked on the water, Jesus was "about to pass by them" (v. 48). This probably recalls the way that God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 33:19-22). Moses had asked to see God, and God allowed him to see his back as God passed by. Or when the prophet Elijah felt alone and fearful for his life, God

commanded him to come out of his cave and stand on the mount, "and behold the Lord passed by" (1 Kings 19:11). So here in today's text, Mark is describing how Jesus is God's way of being present in saving power. Yet the disciples didn't recognize him. And even after he went so far as to get in the boat with them, they still didn't understand. This "hardness of heart," present in both the feeding of the multitude and the storm at sea, caused Jesus' disciples to miss what God wanted them to see.

Our Lord continues to "pass by" in various ways. Often, he reveals himself in the situations and circumstances of life when the size and scope of what we face appears to be just too much, too overwhelming for us, much like a crowd full of human need that leaves us feeling helpless and outmatched. The scale of what we're up against can interfere with our spiritual vision, keeping us from recognizing the presence of the one who feeds thousands and walks on water. But we need to remember that though the things we're facing may seem like too much, the saving power of our Lord is much, much more.

Let's draw again on the wisdom of Eugene Peterson who, though addressing pastors in particular, speaks truth that applies to all followers of Jesus, when he says:

Human need is always more apparent than God's presence for the same reason that the earth always looks flat. The human need is very visible in the sickness, the loneliness, the boredom, and the busyness, while all the signs and symbols of God's word and presence are several miles away in the church sanctuary. ... Our awareness of human need crowds out and then takes precedence over our attentiveness to God's presence.<sup>3</sup>

Making progress as a disciple means growing in your attentiveness to God's saving presence, especially when what you see in front of you looks like more than you can manage. When the scale of human strife and division seems insurmountable, or when the uncontrollable and destructive circumstances of life seem ready to triumph, or when our small, storm-tossed boat of a church seems threatened, we need to know that the Lord still "passes by." His presence and saving power are still more than enough to meet the moment.

In this week's mail here at the church, I received a brochure publicizing an upcoming student evangelism event. It listed the music groups that will be leading worship and the speakers who will be delivering messages. One speaker's background and experience were summarized this way: "As one of the nation's forefront speakers, David speaks to over 700,000 people each year using his God-given ability to reach the high tech, attention-lacking culture of Generation Next." Here is a speaker who knows what it's like to look out at a large crowd of people who need to develop attentiveness, most of all to God. Seven hundred thousand people each year, spread out before the preacher.

According to my calculations, today's attendance here, which appears to be in the same range as usual, is about 0.0057% of David's annual listener total. So "crowd" may not be the first word that comes to mind when we think about our Sunday morning worship gathering. Indeed, we're more than just a crowd or an audience. As one person has put it, "An audience is a group of unrelated people drawn together by a short-lived attraction. An audience is a crowd. A church is a family. An audience is a gathering. A church is a fellowship. An audience is a heap of stones. A church is a temple."<sup>4</sup>

Wherever there was Jesus, there were crowds. And out of the crowds Jesus called disciples, followers like you and me who still struggle to recognize the presence of the Lord, to spot him as he "passes by," and to trust that though we often don't have it in us, he always has it

in him. He has the authority and power to handle what overwhelms us, what seems too much for us. He says, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

---

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: Harper One, 2012) 157.

<sup>2</sup> Nik Wallenda, *Balance: A Story of Faith, Family, and Life on the Line* (New York: Faith Words, 2013) n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, in *Under the Unpredictable Plant*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 39, No. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Charles E. Jefferson, *Leadership*, Vol. 11, No. 4.