

The Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 5
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
June 6, 2021
Genesis 3:8-15
Psalm 138 or 130
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
Mark 3:20-35

From Crowd to Community

“The crowd came together again...” Did you hear that at the beginning of today’s gospel?
“The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat.”

The crowd came together again, Mark’s gospel says. Where had the crowd been?

Our gospel today begins with verse 20 of the third chapter of Mark. At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus healed a man in the synagogue on the sabbath day. Members of the religious establishment were watching him like a hawk. Mark says that after Jesus performed this healing on the sabbath, members of different factions within the religious establishment who seldom agreed about anything found common cause in coming up with a way to get rid of him.

For the majority of folks living in the area near the Sea of Galilee at that time, though, the news about Jesus is not whether he was breaking religious laws by healing on the day set aside for rest. No, for them, the news, the good news, is that he is healing people. And he is teaching them in a way that helps them understand God and the world and each other and themselves differently.

So, while some people are worried about what Jesus was doing and how he was doing it, for the majority of people—people who are tired, who are sick, who are pressed down and worn out, who work and work and work and never seem to get ahead, who feel disconnected, who have no hope, who are hungry and thirsty for things they don’t quite have words to describe—for them, Jesus is good news incarnate.

And that’s why every time Jesus tries to go from one place to another, a crowd of people flocks to him. He performs healings; he offers teachings. For hours and hours. And then he exits.

Today we’re only in the third chapter of Mark’s gospel, but already the pattern is set. Jesus goes out; he meets people where they are; he interacts with them; he is more curious than judgmental; he sees as God sees; he brings God near; he *is* good news. He gives himself in relationship and gives himself over to encounters that are life-changing for everyone. And then he goes away. Into seclusion. Often up a mountain. To rest. To recharge. To get re-grounded and refocused. Sometimes completely alone, and sometimes with a few others.

And this pattern set by Jesus, our model in all things, is intended for us as well. Engage and withdraw. Work and rest. Community and solitude.

Where our gospel begins today, Jesus has just come down from a mountain. While on the mountain getting a break from the crowd, he has chosen a posse of twelve male students to keep traveling with him. Mark says Jesus called the ones he wanted, and they came to him. They were an interesting crew. They were from a lot of different backgrounds and had not only a lot of different interests but also a lot of different agendas. And Jesus called each of them, and they responded.

And the term that is used most often for these is *disciple*. A follower, a friend, a student, a learner, one who takes up the discipline of learning and living in a particular way in a committed relationship to a teacher.

Jesus and this crew of disciples come back down the mountain. They go back to his hometown. And, *The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat.*

Jesus' family were worried about him. They thought he had gone 'round the bend. People were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." Religious leaders were saying, "He is casting out demons in the name of the ruler of demons." Our gospel today from Mark says that when his family heard all this, they went to where he was. *They went out to restrain him.* Most likely, they were trying to do right by him. To their credit, they heard all these things being said about their son and brother and went to see for themselves. It was difficult in first-century Palestine to make it without your family. They went to see if he was alright.

It may be tempting to us in the twenty-first century to use this story as a reason to break off connections with the families into which we were born or by which we were brought up. We shouldn't forget, though, that Jesus' mother and some of his siblings also become his followers. Part of what is revealed here is that in the company of Jesus it is possible for family to be friends and for friends to become family.

And beyond the accusations of some and the health concerns of others, this gospel from Mark gives us real insight into mission and alignment. Specifically, when there is division to the point of fracture, when there is no mission vision or when there are too many different competing visions of mission, there is no forward movement. And, when there is unity of purpose, alignment of focus, and a harnessing of many gifts in service to a common mission, real movement forward is possible.

"The crowd came together again..."

How we long for that day when the crowd, the great host of congregants and visitors can come together in this space, crowded together shoulder to shoulder in the pews and at the altar rail. When we as a great crowd can lift our voices together in song. Without masks. We trust that that day is coming ever closer. And, in the meantime, as the reading from the second letter to the Corinthians has it, “we do not lose heart.” For this pandemic and the protocols it has led us to develop and follow, while it has seemed at many times on many days inordinately long, it is in the long view of our journey on this earth “a momentary affliction.” We will keep going, and we will get through to the other side of it together.

It seems to me that the COVID-19 pandemic will likely be a watershed event ever after for those of us who have lived through it. We are likely to carry it with us as a marker of before and after. Even now I hear it in our language as we refer to “the before times” or “pre-COVID” and so on. Before and after. It has been one of those inversions when, in the language of the show *Hamilton*, “the world turned upside down.”

And it’s just such a watershed event, such an inversion that we encounter in the reading from Genesis today. Something has changed. The first people have gained knowledge they did not previously have. They have arrived in a new circumstance. There are a number of questions that God asks them in this story. I find I am particularly drawn to the first one. Our ancestors hear the sound of God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. They know things have changed because of what they have done. They know that they know things they did not know before. And God’s first question to them is, “Where are you?”

I invite you to hear that as God’s question to you and to us this morning. “Where are you?” We are embarking upon a new chapter as a congregation officially this weekend. I am now duly installed as the thirty-fourth rector of St Paul’s, Key West, the southernmost Anglican outpost on the eastern seaboard of the US. We are now well and truly in this together. Do you hear God asking in a loving, helpful, orient-yourself kind of way, “Where are you?”

Today is not the day when we have to give an answer. Rather, today is the day when we should ask ourselves if we haven’t already, “Where are we?” Because from this joyful and auspicious starting point of our collaboration as rector and congregation, as priest and people at the waning of this great pandemic, we must needs begin from where we are. We begin where we are, and together we will in various ways discern what we are called to do in this particular context at this particular moment in history.

Isn’t it amazing that God has chosen to place us here together now? What do you imagine the Creator is calling us to do and be together in the company of Jesus the Christ and one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit? God give us grace to imagine and courage and wisdom to follow. Amen.