

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 8
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
June 27, 2021
Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24
Psalm 30
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Mark 5:21-43

Crowded Blessing

Sometimes proximity is awesome. Being close together in person—just being together at all—sometimes is most excellent. Certainly, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the inability to gather together in the usual ways, to be close to one another when we want to be, was among the most difficult things to cope with for many of us. Thankfully, even though we are still observing some distancing protocols for the common good, as more and more people are vaccinated we are able, step by step, to return to being together, to proximity in person.

But how do you feel about crowds? Some of us probably love them. Others of us might well hate them. Sometimes I love the energy of crowds, at a ballgame or performance, for example. Other times, I must confess, being too close to too many people when we are all squeezed together can trigger my claustrophobia.

In the best moments, as part of a crowd we can experience what the sociologist Emile Durkheim called “collective effervescence.” In worse moments, as part of a crowd we can experience feeling trapped. And at the very worst moments a crowd can become a mob that enacts violence *en masse* or that tramples and kills unfortunate souls who fall underfoot.

Crowds are sometimes energizing, sometimes scary, sometimes downright dangerous.

+++

Last week's gospel had us out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm. That was the first of four times in Mark's gospel that Jesus and his disciples cross the lake.

Today's gospel picks up when Jesus and the disciples have just crossed the lake a second time, going back in the other direction from last week. They get out of the boat. He hasn't even left the shore of the lake. Once again, a crowd of people swarms around them trying to hear Jesus, to get close to him. Jesus and his friends go from being surrounded by water to being surrounded by people, from the rhythm of the waves to the press of humanity all around.

I don't know about you, but the last thing I want to do in the midst of a crowd is throw myself down at somebody's feet. It sounds positively life-threatening. And yet, that is exactly what a synagogue leader named Jairus does. He falls down at Jesus' feet and begs him over and over, "My little girl is about to die. Come and lay your hands on her, come and lay your hands on her, please come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

Did you hear who this begging, pleading father is? Jairus, a synagogue leader. Jesus went to synagogue on the sabbath wherever he was. Luke (4:16) says it was his custom to do so. Remember when he got in hot water with synagogue leaders for healing people on the sabbath? Remember when synagogue leaders rose up to take him by force when they didn't like his preaching in his hometown?

How desperate must this synagogue-leader dad have been to ask in such humility for Jesus, possible heretic, challenger of customs, upsetter of the status quo, to heal his daughter? Anyone who has worried over a sick child or loved one can likely relate. When someone we love is at the point of death, many of us would do almost anything to make it otherwise.

Jesus goes with Jairus. And the disciples and the huge crowd of folks go, too. They are jammed up against one another. On the way to heal a young daughter of Israel, an old daughter of Israel, a sick one, a desperate one, a destitute one who is part of that claustrophobia-inducing crowd, lays a hand on Jesus' cloak. She has been silently suffering and profusely bleeding for twelve years—for as long as Jairus' daughter has been alive. Can you hear her chanting to herself, "Just let me lay my hand on him, let me lay my hand on him, please let me lay my hand on him, and I will be made well and live."

She's right: her efforts are rewarded. She only touches Jesus' cloak and she is instantly healed of the hemorrhages that have kept her sick, kept her isolated, kept her home alone and ashamed, and enticed her to spend everything she had on healers who couldn't make her better.

Jesus feels power go out of him; he is immediately aware that something has happened. He turns around, with that mass of humanity pressing in upon him and asks, "Who touched my clothes?"

What kind of question is that, the disciples ask. That's what I find myself asking as well: what kind of question is that? Is it judgmental? Accusatory? Ready for retaliation?

Or is it a genuine inquiry? Is it born out of real curiosity?

This woman who has demonstrated such *chutzpah* in her desperation to be made well is now full of fear. She only wanted healing; she didn't want to draw attention to herself. Jesus is waiting on an answer. In spite of her fear, she steps forward. She, like Jairus the desperate father, falls at his feet and tells him the whole truth.

Jesus' question is not an accusation. It is an invitation. This woman who had lived in isolation as bad as or worse than any COVID quarantine for twelve years was not cursed, not criticized, not shunned. She was seen. At last. And her true value and the dignity of her personhood were recognized. Jesus does not call her insulting names. He calls her, "Daughter." He communicates to her that she too is God's own beloved. He speaks words of healing, words of blessing, words of grace.

Though she is old and worn out, Jesus has time for her. She is a daughter as much as any twelve-year-old child.

What is your healing power? Who needs to hear the words of reconciliation or forgiveness or blessing that you are able to speak? Who is invisible in your life or in this community? Who is it that we all need to see more clearly or even see at all? To whom are we as St Paul's called to speak a word of grace? To whom are we called to advocates and allies?

+++

Such good news for her. A life-changing and life-saving encounter. In the midst of it though, Jairus' daughter has died. "Don't trouble the teacher anymore," comes the message. "It's too late. She's gone."

Jesus continues to accompany Jairus, all the way to his house. "Don't listen to them," he says, "listen to me."

Who knows if there had been a crowd of people at Jairus' house before, but by the time Jesus and Jairus and everybody else get there, there's a great commotion there. Lots of weeping and wailing. "She's only sleeping," says Jesus to the ridicule of those gathered.

Jesus, our model in all things, is able to see the life beyond death. He is not afraid of difficulties or desperation or dirt. He knows the truth of today's first reading: "God made us in the image of God's own eternity. The generative forces of the world are wholesome." They move toward wholeness, healing, holiness: they all come from the same root. He does not withhold his love and care until people have somehow proved themselves. He extends compassion to everyone and meets us where we are.

He takes only the girl's parents with him into her room. Only those who are holding out hope and willing to try whatever is indicated, willing to risk something big for something good. All the naysayers and the ones saying, "There's nothing to be done," are left behind.

It's those who risk reputation and going against "the things everybody knows" who enter a deeper intimacy with Jesus the Christ.

The parents see their girl restored to life. They are overcome by amazement. They can resume being her parents by taking the next indicated step and getting her something to eat. Life is changed not ended.

Are there voices speaking to you about how things cannot be changed? Maybe they are the voices of critical or judgmental people. Maybe they are the internalized messages picked up when you were very young or somewhere across the years of life. They speak judgment, negativity, death. They tell us to give up. Do they keep you from going deeper in your walk with God? Do they make you feel foolish for having faith? Do you need to leave them behind?

The God that Jesus brought near is a God of possibility. An accompanying, companioning God who empowers us as we continue in the apostles' fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers to behold what we are and become what we receive: the body of Christ broken and given for the world. God help us.