

Proper 11B/2
July 22, 2012
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Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

Blessed be the Name of God

My younger son, Dan, lives in San Francisco, where he has been as student and now architect for a number of years. Not so long ago, Amy and I were in that wonderful city to spend time with Dan and to get ourselves away from the numberless realities that seemed to shape our days and control our lives.

We rode cable cars. Traveled on the BART, the Bay Area Rapid Transit. We visited Fisherman's Wharf, China Town, the Mission District and any number of galleries and museums. And, given that Amy Donohue, my Beloved, is one of the great shoppers of our time, we perused any number of shops and stores, boutiques and stalls, indoors and out. With the exception of the time we spent together in our hotel room, we were continually part of a crowd, the great and seemingly uncontrolled and undirected wash of people, almost all of them, seemingly, traveling in the opposite direction. We developed a very keen ability to step aside, to get out of the way of the ones surging towards us from wherever it was that they were lurking.

The thing that struck us most significantly about our time on the downtown streets of San Francisco was the large and painful number of people obviously in desperate straits. Most were older men and women in rags, some begging, some sitting on the sidewalk against the sides of buildings, some crumpled into wheel chairs, some curled up in a fetal position asleep on the ground. It wasn't so much the concentration of them in a particular location as it was the frequency with which they appeared wherever we went,

whether we were on foot, or on the bus, or on the train. They didn't seem to create a particular menace, though my son, and the people at our hotel, gave us counsel about which streets to walk and which to avoid, as if to protect us from some imagined harm. As much as we enjoyed our time in the City by the Bay, and we surely did enjoy ourselves, we were continuously conscience of the distraught and seeming lost people we saw, people whose presence gave a certain character to the crowds, wherever we came upon them, or better, whenever they came upon us.

It was with all this in mind that I began ruminating upon the text we have just read from Mark's gospel, Jesus in the midst of the crowd. It's remarkable how much time Jesus spent amongst crowds, his efforts to find solitude notwithstanding. Unlike some of us, perhaps, and certainly unlike me, Jesus was not only able to cope with crowds; he seems to have flourished when surrounded by the many, the *hoi polloi*, "the masses." As our text makes eminently clear, great crowds pressed upon him at every turn.

In recent weeks, as we have read our way through the Gospel of Mark, we have encountered countless crowds. We have read about the raising of Jairus's daughter and the healing of the woman with the great flow of blood. Today we read about Jesus and his friends being unable even to find time and place to eat, such is the pressure of the crowd. Still their efforts to escape and find a place alone come to no good end, as people continue to pursue them. And Jesus, gracious as he is, as the text says, "...had compassion on them" for they, the crowd, were lost, "...like sheep without a shepherd."

As Mark does, so do I want you to see and know the power and authority of Jesus to accomplish remarkable things, to see these stories as evidence, testimony to what God

intends and what God accomplishes. Beyond that, I want you to see those remarkable accomplishments, those godly triumphs, as part of Jesus' life and ministry in and with the crowd. I want to see this string of stories as simply particular instances drawn from countless others, taken from Jesus' life in the crowd. The Crowd.

Whether you and I can accomplish such remarkable and godly things only God will know, but that we are called to live and serve amongst the many, within the crowd, that is a certainty. Like it or not, not only must we live and serve amongst the many, we must also know ourselves as part of that same crowd, and not separate from it. The throng that followed Jesus, the crush of people that surrounded Jesus, the washed and the unwashed, we are there, amongst them.

I didn't know what to do about the sad and disoriented people I saw so often in San Francisco, other than to say "hello" on occasion, to weep in my heart for them and to raise them to God in prayer. My touching them would doubtless not heal them, and their touching me likely would not staunch the flow of their life's blood. But, nonetheless, they are a part of the crowd, just as I am. Just as you are.

When Jesus sat at table with his earthly companions for the last time, the time we call the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and gave it to his companions and said, "This is my body, given for you." We hear these words repeated every time we pray at the altar table over bread and wine. "Given for you; Shed for you." In both instances, as recorded in Scripture, Jesus speaks in the plural. You, plural. The sacrificial life of Jesus was offered and given for "you, plural." Think about that. Not for you, singular, but for you, plural.

Here is where the Christian life begins, in the plural. The saving death of Jesus was accomplished for some collective, some “plural,” the crowd, the many, the *hoi polloi*. Try as we may want to make it “for me” that Christ gave himself, the true testimony is that he gave his life, a ransom for “the many.”

True as this is, it’s still a hard sell. So many of us want to translate that “you, plural,” as “you singular.” It was not God’s intent in Jesus to create a personal savior for me. God’s intent in Jesus was that he be the Savior of the World!

For countless years, I have lectured about this fact in class, in association with the words used when communion is distributed in Rite I. The language there is the historic language of former Prayer Books as well. These “words of administration” as they are called, go this way,

“The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving.”

“The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ’s Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful.”

Many of you doubtless recognize these words.

In my teaching and right this minute in this sermon, I want to testify that what Jesus did and does was not done and is not done for me, privately, individually and uniquely. Nor was it done or is it done now for you each as discreet individuals.

What God accomplished in the death and rising of Jesus was done for “the many.” And you and I participate in that saving reality by our membership and participation in the crowd, “the many.” Our standing before God, first of all, is as part of the *hoi polloi*,

and not on our own singularity. Our singularity is a derivative. The gift of Christ was not given for “me,” but rather for “us,” the many.

If Amy and I were to give a gift to this parish, say a computer for use by the youth group, it would not make any sense for anyone in that group to report over supper to their table companions, “Amy and Bill gave me a new laptop.” The imagined gift was given to the youth group in this parish. The access by any one person to the gift is as a member of the group, the community, as part of the crowd, as one of the *hoi polloi*.

What I wish Rite I said is this, “The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for the many, preserve your body and soul...Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for the many, and [you] feed on him in your heart by faith, with thanksgiving.” And so also with the wine. We participate and appropriate the gift by our common life in the community.

This perspective makes a good deal of difference for our respective ministries. If we understand that we are part of the crowd, then our attention to the common life of the crowd is not only gracious but also a matter of enlightened self interest. In either case, attention to the common life of the crowd is of the utmost importance. We will work and pray for the health of the many. We will struggle for proper public facilities. We will work for adequate health care for the general populace. We will help in whatever way our strength and resources will allow to serve and heal the crowd.

I am a devout introvert. Being by myself is an easy thing for me and being in a crowd is a serious challenge, everywhere, all the time. Simply reading over the gospel for this morning almost makes me want to run and hide. So my own admonition to see myself/ourselves as part of the crowd, that admonition is not really good news to me. I’d

sooner be left alone, thank you very much. But the point is inescapable and the placement, amongst the many, true and necessary. Even for the most devoted introvert, the Christian life is always most richly and most faithfully lived in the plural. I have access to the generosity of God as a member of the many, and from that place, I appropriate particular graces. So it with all of us. All of us before each of us. That is the logic of the gospel, on the streets of San Francisco, on Whidbey Island and everywhere else. All of us before each of us.

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