

An Eager Crowd - Mark 3:7-12

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How many here are energized by large crowds? How many here try to avoid large crowds? I probably could count on one hand the number of times I have been in a really large crowd. My first memory of being in a large crowd was as a child in Roanoke, VA. I grew up in a town with a population of about 300. The nearest city of any size was Roanoke with a population of about 100,000. The football stadium there is called Victory Stadium. Our family went there to watch the fireworks for the 4th of July. I don't remember a lot of the dynamics of the crowd that night. But I do remember the awesome sights of the fireworks and how loud they were. My most recent memory of being in a large crowd was in Pittsburgh, PA. Three of us guys went to PNC Park to watch a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball game. I remember the crowd being pretty relaxed and friendly. I believe they were playing the San Francisco Giants. Barry Bonds used to play for the Pirates and at this time he was playing for the other team. So, when he got up to bat, there was a noticeable "Booo!" from the crowd.

Jesus was often surrounded by large crowds. It amazes me how Jesus stayed focused in the midst of the dynamics of a large crowd (He didn't have a microphone). We find Him encountering a large crowd in our story today. Before we open God's Word, let's ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Here is a summary of today's story: A great multitude found Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. They came from all directions in response to hearing all the things He was doing. Foreseeing the coming crowds, Jesus made arrangements for a boat, to keep from being overcrowded. Many of these people came in order to be healed and delivered from demon possession. While the demons proclaimed Him to be the Son of God, Jesus rebuked them.

Let's consider what Jesus experienced in this story. First of all, He experienced leaving town. In our previous story Jesus was in a synagogue, where He experienced conflict with the Pharisees. As a result of that conflict Jesus experienced persecution. Now in Mark 3:7 we read: "Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea". In other words, He went to a place along the shores of Sea of Galilee. He didn't continue ministering in the town where He was. Both Jesus and the Pharisees left town after the service that Sabbath in the synagogue. Many scholars believe Jesus withdrew to what was known as the "Plain of Gennesaret". This was a very fertile plain next to the Sea of Galilee. It was referred to as the "paradise of Galilee" or the "garden of God". It certainly would have been large enough to accommodate large crowds.

Second of all, Jesus experienced increased popularity. In verse 7 and again in verse 8 Mark mentions a "great multitude". Jesus had been popular for some time now. But in our story today His popularity reached a new level. The number of people swelled to the thousands. And they came from all directions. Mark gives a whole list of places. First, he mentions Galilee. Jesus Himself was in Galilee, but these people came from other parts of this region. Second, is Judea. Jesus was rejected there by the Jewish leaders early on in His ministry. But in spite of this, the common people in Judea were still attracted to Him. Third is Jerusalem. Jerusalem was located in Judea. But it is believed that the city of Jerusalem was politically a separate district from Judea. Fourth Mark mentions Idumea or "land of Edom". The people there were descendants of Esau or Edomites. They had been forced to adopt Judaism at an earlier time. The fifth region mentioned is referred to as "Beyond the Jordan" or more literally "across the Jordan". Often the Jordan River was used as a geographical boundary running north to south. There were two towns called Bethany. One was near Jerusalem. The other was on the other side of the Jordan River and was called Bethany Beyond the Jordan. The last region mentioned is Tyre & Sidon. These were twin Canaanite cities about 20 mi. apart. Sidon was the son of Canaan (hence the name Canaanite). Canaan was the son of Ham, who was the son of Noah. So, these cities had been around for quite a while. Later when the Greeks overthrew the cities of Tyre and Sidon, that area became known as Phoenicia. These people from these different regions came because of what they heard of Jesus' works. They hoped to witness and experience Jesus' miraculous healing for themselves.

Third, Jesus experienced being crowded. In Mark 3:9 it says that Jesus "told His disciples that a small boat should be kept ready for Him." The reason was "because of the multitude, lest they should crush Him." This word translated "crush" simply means "to crowd". It is used in a variety of instances and gives the idea of being confined, either by people or circumstances. A further description of Jesus' experience of being crowded is mentioned in Mark 3:10 where it says the people "pressed about Him". This word translated "pressed about" means to "fall upon". It can mean a friendly embrace or being seized by force. So Jesus was being confined. He was being pushed by a crowd eager to touch Him. Some of the stories the people had heard may have included the healing of Simon's mother-in-law and that of the leper, in which Jesus brought healing by His touch.

Fourth, Jesus experienced healing many afflictions. The word translated "afflictions" in Mark 3:10 is the Greek word *mastix*. This was a whip used for scourging. These people had been suffering under sickness and demon possession like someone being whipped. When they came to Jesus, He provided relief. He brought an end to their suffering. How amazing that Jesus never ran out of compassion or power. Whenever people came to Him for healing, they experienced what they were longing for.

Last, Jesus experienced rebuking the demons. Let's read Mark 3:11, 12. The experience described here, according to the verb tenses used, was an ongoing occurrence. Over and over, as those who were demon possessed came to Jesus, the demons fell down and cried out, "You are the Son of God!" But each time Jesus "sternly warned them" to not make Him known. The two words translated "sternly warned" mean "strongly censure or rebuke". They also can mean to "forbid". The idea portrayed by these words reveals Jesus' authority over the demons. The demons were trying to ruin His credibility as the Messiah. But He would not let them. It's interesting how authoritative He is with the demons in contrast to how He dealt with the Pharisees, who also tried to ruin His credibility.

Let's consider now how this story reveals Jesus as our example. How do we know from this story what a healthy and dangerous looks like? First of all, Jesus is revealed as our example in that He minimized conflict. After the conflict with the Pharisees in the synagogue (our last story in Mark 3:1-6), Jesus "withdrew" (Mark 3:7). He did not antagonize the Pharisees or run after them in order to agitate them. He was not an "in your face" type of person. Neither did He continue His ministry like nothing had happened. He didn't say, "I'm the Son of God. I can do whatever I want. It doesn't matter if the Pharisees are trying to kill Me." He responded to the conflict by withdrawing. In this He was minimizing conflict.

Conflict does not serve the purposes of God. Jesus did not come to this earth to create conflict. He came to save the world and reveal the character of His Father. In the process of accomplishing these tasks, He encountered conflict. But He did what He could to minimize it. So He reveals a healthy and dangerous Christian as someone who doesn't stir up trouble. There are people who hop from one church to the next. And wherever they go, they create conflict. Jesus is our example in that He did not avoid conflict, neither did He stir it up. He did what God called Him to do, and minimized the conflict that arose from those who opposed His ministry.

Second, Jesus is revealed as our example in that He was prepared for the crowd. Jesus told the disciples that "a small boat should be kept ready" (Mark 3:9). He anticipated the need that would arise from such a large, eager crowd. And He made arrangements for it. By the use of this boat Jesus accommodated the large numbers of people. He was able to continue His ministry without being pushed around or confined. There was never a situation where Jesus was caught off guard. He was always prepared when a need arose. He never had to say, "Sorry, you'll have to come back later. I wasn't expecting this many people."

I find it interesting how the early Christian church accommodated the large numbers of people who were converted on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2:41 Luke records that 3,000 people were brought into the church in one day. In verse 47 of Luke 2 it says that more people were joining the church on a daily basis. Finally, in Acts 4:4 the number had risen to 5,000. How could a small group of believers (perhaps 120 according to Acts 1:15) accommodate thousands of new converts? They had learned from Jesus. They had repeatedly seen Him

handle large crowds up to 10,000 people (Matthew 14:21). The early church probably divided these large numbers into their own homes. They, like Jesus, were prepared for these large numbers of people.

Applying this ability on a more personal level, turn with me to 1 Peter 3:15. Peter says to "always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you." We may never experience a large crowd coming to us for help. But it is likely that an individual will approach us and ask us about our faith. For example, "How you can remain calm when everyone else is going berserk?" A healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who is prepared for such an encounter. It's someone who is ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them. Jesus' example teaches us to plan ahead for these opportunities.

Certainly not in our church, but I have seen in other churches where it is more common to worry than to be prepared. For example, "I don't know what I would say if someone asked me." Many of us don't like being put on the spot. We don't like to be singled out concerning our faith, beliefs, or lifestyle. This may be because we are not very proud of our Christian experience or because we are fearful. Jesus wants us to be healthy and dangerous Christians. He wants us to have a real experience to share.

Jesus was prepared for the coming crowds. And a healthy and dangerous Christian is prepared for the people who will ask them how they can have hope in a ruined world.

I have spent some time considering the experience of the people who made up this large crowd in our story today. These people traveled many miles to get to Jesus. The most common way to get from one place to another in those days was by foot. Those who came from Idumea probably traveled the furthest. It could have been close to 150 miles from the Plain of Gennesaret where Jesus was. Traveling by foot this trip would take several days. That's a long way to walk, but when you have hope of being free of "afflictions" (Mark 3:10), distance is no barrier. Their suffering was like being whipped. As we learned, that's the meaning of the word translated "afflictions". So these people were desperate for relief. For years they had had no hope. They didn't know of an escape... until they heard about Jesus. Then in their desperate need, they became desperate for Jesus.

I have found that it's when I am desperate for God, that I experience Him the most. When I am losing control and my life is falling apart, that's when He works in my life more than any other time.

Jesus came for the desperate. He came to preach good news to the poor. He came to heal the depressed. He came to set free those who are held captive by sin. He came to give sight to those who can't see a way out. He came to deliver those who are abused (Luke 4:18). In short, He came for the desperate.

What about those who aren't desperate? I have found that when things are going pretty smoothly, I don't feel my need for God as much. And if I don't need Him, then I won't travel all the way from Sidon to get to Him.

None of us like feeling desperate. I know I don't. But I'm starting to realize that feeling desperate for God is good. When I'm in a desperate situation, and I call to God for help, He is faithful. I have found Him to be trustworthy. We all need healing. We may not have a disease or be demon possessed. But we all have faults. We are all sinners. The only ones who will experience healing are those of us who are desperate for relief. May we always feel desperate for Him. For this is when we will call for help. And this is when we will be healed.