

“Gathering Around Jesus”

Based on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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It’s a fishing trip I will never forget. Our family owned a timeshare on Padre Island, along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. One summer, when we were down there, we took a fishing charter to go out into the gulf to fish for red snapper. It was a particularly choppy day, causing the boat to go up and down the whole time. Well, for the whole time we were out there I fished for all of 15 minutes. The rest of the time I was either throwing up or trying not to. It was not a fun experience. I did manage to catch a snapper. But it was not exactly the fishing experience I had hoped for. Needless to say I was relieved when we finally got off that boat and was on solid ground, even though for a good two hours it felt even the land was rocking back and forth. If you asked me then, I would have told you that was my last time to take a fishing charter boat. And, in fact, I haven’t gone out again.

I’m sure the disciples were glad to be on solid ground with the boat moored after their night time journey across the stormy sea. It was a frightful storm, even for these seasoned fisher men. But the choppy seas were not the only thing that frightened them that night. They saw Jesus walking out to them on the water! They thought it was a ghost. But Jesus climbed into the boat and instantly the wind ceased and the sea grew calm. They were utterly astounded. And now, having experienced a night on the sea they would never forget, they were safe and secure on solid ground.

Have any of you been on a boat when the surf is rough and the boat is rocking back and forth? It’s not fun. It generates anxiety. It sometimes even makes you physically sick. Sometimes life is like that. Sometimes life hits us like a gale force wind and we find ourselves rocking back and forth from one crisis to the next. Just as we can’t control the wind, sometimes situations beyond our control come at us and knock us around. And sometimes our lives get so rocky and stressful that we can actually get physically sick from it. There are times we wish

we could press pause on our life so we can get out of the storm and rest awhile on solid ground.

And in a way that's what we are doing right now. When we come to church on Sunday morning, it is sort of like mooring the boat that is daily life so that we can stand on solid ground. I'm talking about the solid ground that is the church, this living faith that is founded on the rock which is Jesus Christ. The church that we are gathered into today is an expression of a tradition that has stretched out for over 2000 years. Empires have risen and fallen but the church remains. And so when we gather here on Sunday morning we are able to step away from the restless sea that is our daily lives and rest on solid ground.

It is good to be here in this place for a time of rest on this solid ground, this gathered community where we find safety and security. We need times to rest from the turbulent lives we live. But we need more than just a brief hour of rest. We have other needs that need met. What are those needs? What is available for us as we are gathered here on the solid ground that is the church of Jesus Christ?

We heard in the scriptures this morning that the crowds rushed to Jesus. They didn't wait for him to drop by their house. They went to where he was and gathered around him. And as they flocked to Jesus, Jesus was filled with compassion for them, looking upon them as sheep without a shepherd. They were a people in need of guidance, instruction, wisdom. And so, as the people gathered around Jesus, he taught them many things.

In the same way, we gather together Sunday after Sunday. We gather as a people in need of guidance, instruction, wisdom. Importantly, you are not gathering around me. We are all gathering around Jesus who is the Word of God. The Word is opened to us in the reading of scripture, the reciting of a psalm, and the singing of hymns. It is my earnest hope that in these sermons I deliver that there is something in them that Jesus desires to impart to us and that anything I say that is not of God would drift away as chaff in the wind. The same goes for the Friendship Circle, where Susanne, Jean, and Melissa share insights from God's Word.

We also hear in the scriptures that the crowds rushed to Jesus, bringing those who were ill to him, so that they might touch him and be healed. The people needed more than just instruction. There were many sick people that needed healing. And it appears that it took more than Jesus offering up a pastoral prayer for healing. Neither a general prayer, nor a specific prayer request was sufficient. Those who were sick needed to be touched by Jesus. What was required for healing was a one-on-one direct encounter with the great healer. They begged to Jesus that they might be given permission only to touch the fringe of his cloak. And so we read that all who touched the fringe of his cloak were healed. Personal, direct contact was required for healing to take place.

Is this not true for us? We gather together, not just to receive instruction from the word of God but also to be healed. We are all in need of healing. And this healing is not limited to physical healing. The healing we need includes emotional healing as well as spiritual healing. In the rough and tumble of life we get injured in a multitude of ways. Sometimes others hurt us by their words or their actions. Sometimes we hurt ourselves by our own self-talk and our own actions.

And yes, prayer makes a difference. The pastoral prayer I give every Sunday is not a waste of time. Praying for the well-being of others, both in a general sense and with specificity, certainly doesn't hurt. Prayer opens up the possibility for God to act, to work the healing that God desires for every person. Prayer is one way we co-operate with God's healing work.

But I submit to you that for healing to occur there is a need for a personal encounter with Jesus. Of course, I am talking in a spiritual sense. And because it is a personal, spiritual connection, it's not something I can speak about with any sense of clarity or objectivity. To have that personal connection is a knowing that is subjective. It's like when my sister asked me how I knew that Kim was the one I was meant to marry. All I could say was, "I just know." It's the same thing with a personal encounter with Jesus. When it happens, you know it within the depths of your soul. And that encounter has power that endures. It is an encounter that is imprinted on your very being. You carry that encounter with you for the rest of your days. And sometimes that encounter is

renewed, and you feel the effects of that encounter. At least, that is my experience.

There's one thing I want to highlight for you that we heard in the scripture reading, specifically vv. 55 and 56, where we hear that the people brought the sick on mats to wherever Jesus was, laying the sick before Jesus so that he might touch them and be healed. They didn't ask Jesus to come to the sick, they brought the sick to Jesus. These were people that for whatever reason were unable to get to Jesus. So they didn't tell Jesus where to go, whose house to visit. No, they brought the sick to where Jesus was.

So this gets me to thinking. I am trying to think of people I know who are in need of a personal encounter with Jesus, who are in need of healing, people that I need to take the initiative to bring to church, where Jesus is, so that they too might have that encounter and be healed from whatever ails them. Do you know of anyone? As you make a mental image of the people you know or associate with, is there anyone that you feel a prompting to bring with you to church some Sunday? This is something I invite you to keep in the back of your mind. If you ever find yourself in conversation with somebody who is expressing their need for healing, in addition to maybe saying, "I'll pray for you," also ask, "Are you free this Sunday? I would like to take you to my church. There are some great people there. It is a place where I find peace and encouragement. I think you might enjoy it."

And this leads me to the last thing I want to talk about. When Jesus looked at the crowd gathering around him, he had compassion for them. Compassion is not the same thing as pity. Pity is a feeling that comes from your heart. It's a feeling that maybe makes you sad or weighs you down a little. Pity is like feeling bad for someone and maybe thinking to yourself, "But for the grace of God, that could be me." But compassion is a feeling that comes from your gut, from the pit of your stomach. This is a feeling where you can relate in some way with what the person is going through. It hits home. And you are drawn to respond in some way. You can't just shrug your shoulders and then move on. Compassion drives you to respond.

I recently heard a great story about this guy who owns a bar in North Carolina who demonstrates for me what compassion is all about. It all started when a patron told him that her wallet had been stolen and inside the wallet was not just money but her wedding band. The bartender said he would do what he could. He personally reviewed hours of security video tape until he spotted her wallet sitting on the bench outside his establishment. He then watched a young man take the wallet. He later found the man, just a 17 year old kid. The boy confessed to taking the wallet. He was homeless, estranged from his family, and was trying to make it on his own. He took the money and then threw the wallet into a lake. The bartender then hired a diving crew to go search for the wallet. They found the wallet and inside of it was the woman's wedding band. But the story doesn't end there. The bartender took the boy into his own home. He also hired him to work at the bar. The boy can't thank him enough for going the extra mile to help him get back on the right track. This bar owner embodies compassion. I would love to know his backstory, what experiences he had in his life that made it possible for him to be moved to action in such an abundant way to respond to the needs of others.

We can be inspired by this man to have the same compassion for others. But I want to leave you with this thought. We would like to aspire to be the ones acting out of compassion, but do we ever think about how we are the ones in need of a compassionate response? We would much rather be givers of compassion than receivers of it. Most of the time we don't want to consider ourselves in need of anyone's care, much less pity. We strive to be self-sufficient. Maybe sometimes we don't think we are deserving of anyone's care, much less anyone's compassion. We would rather suffer alone than be the recipient of someone's loving care. Why is that? Why are we afraid to acknowledge our own vulnerability, our own hurts and loss, our own need for care? I just want you to know that when Jesus looked out over the crowd and was moved with compassion, that Jesus was looking at you and me. He knows what we need, even if we aren't so clear ourselves of what we need. And Jesus does not pity us. He has compassion for us. He is moved to action, to respond to our needs. So be grateful that when Jesus

looks at you, he sees you with eyes of compassion. And he will do whatever is possible to meet your deepest needs, so that you may be free from everything that prevents you from living an abundant life, so that you might be healed.