

The Power of a Crowd

(John 12:1-8)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7, 2019

In the name of one God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

Those who crafted the cycle of readings for our lectionary have given us a very particular set of boundaries in this Gospel passage. Those boundaries are known as the “pericope;” there is your nickel theological term for the morning. However, I think that one of the most fascinating aspects of the twelfth chapter of John is not even found in the eight verses that we just heard. No, I am going to go a bit further and add verse nine; it reads:

Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead.

It is in this verse that we find the one thing that draws my attention: **the crowd**.

Consider first who is present in this narrative. We have Lazarus, a man raised from the dead, hosting a dinner for Jesus, the honored guest who had been the one to call him out of the tomb. We have his two sisters, Mary and Martha, working to make sure the event is a success ... and one of them, Mary, went so far as to lovingly anoint the feet of Jesus with an oil so expensive that very few could have ever afforded it. Seated around the room were the disciples, with all but one – Judas – silent and unnamed in this scene.

And as if a house full of guests was not enough, we learn in verse nine there was a crowd of folks gathered outside, waiting for a glimpse of Jesus and the man who was on the receiving end of one of his greatest miracles. Now this was not simply a small group standing around; we are told this was a great crowd clamoring for a view. So here we have commotion outside the house and conversation and activity inside.

There are at least 16 people at the dinner and dozens or perhaps even hundreds hanging out in Lazarus’ front yard. With all of the invited guests and the many, many others who crashed the event, it was becoming quite a party. And in the midst of this gathering, among all of the named and unnamed people at this one place at this one moment, I am not drawn one of the bigger figures. It is not Jesus, or Mary or even Judas that seizes my attention in this reading. For me, it is the **crowd**, all those not even involved in the events unfolding within the house, that pulls at me.

I am particularly drawn to those anonymous men and women found throughout the Old and New Testaments. For people apparently so unremarkable in their world that they were not

even named, they were often the ones who witnessed – and many times, were directly involved in – the most remarkable occurrences.

The unnamed blind man on the side of the road. The centurion's daughter. Peter's mother. People not known by their name, but only by a characteristic or relationship. But their names were known to God, and to Jesus, and because of that – in a single moment – their ordinary lives were made extraordinary.

And that is why I am so fascinated by this group. They were only after one thing, to look upon the face of the Messiah, to see the presence of God in the world – their world. To us, perhaps, they may not have been asking for much; likely for those gathered in front of the house, however, they were asking for everything.

What does this say about the many unnamed, unknown people in our world ... refugees, prisoners, addicts, the homeless, the abused, the abandoned, the lonely ... who are clamoring to see a sign of God in their lives? What are our roles and responsibilities as leaders in the Church to seek these people where they are and offer them love and hope? And how do we care for these people when we ourselves are part of the crowd clamoring for hope and strength and a vision of God in our own lives?

As I often say, the Church does not just exist within the four walls of a building. The world is the Church, and it is into the world we must go; frankly, we simply cannot avoid going into the world. What does that look like? What does it look like for us to live the gospel once we get there?

We cannot just open the door of this place and wait for the crowd to come to us. We must instead leave our sanctuary and go to the crowds to invite them. The sanctuary should be the launching point of each one of the ministries to which we are called, not simply their home.

We should not just notice the crowd gathered near us. We should join the crowd; truthfully, in many instances, we are already part of it. As much as we may want to give others a voice and an invitation and a place of honor in the Church, the crowd may in fact be trying to do the same for us. Do not simply invite; be open to the invitations we may be receiving. Do not just look for ways to bring others to God; be open to the fact that God may be looking for us in the crowd and offering new ways to draw us in.

And we can be drawn into new and deep encounters with Christ by not only hearing, but listening to, the stories of others. While many people we have seen in the Bible and many more we will meet in the world today have no name – or at least a name known to us – they each have a story. In the midst of the stresses and busyness of our own lives, we must take time to listen to those stories.

For all of those people outside of Lazarus' house clamoring to see Jesus, I firmly believe that as a people used to being overlooked and ignored, they were desperate to be heard as much as

seen. Jesus gave an important voice to those in the kingdom who had been silenced. We **can** and **should** do likewise - and our own stories will be richer for the effort.

There are many in the world today being silenced or having their voices drowned out. Perhaps there are some among us who have at one point or another been in that situation. Because of those struggles and the difficulty which many of our sisters and brothers have experienced in being seen, heard and respected, it is even more important that we be the ones to give others in the world a place to make their voices heard ... the space to dream dreams of what the kingdom may look like for them ... a chance to share their stories.

It is a wonderful thing indeed to be invited to a banquet ... to join with friends and family around a table and experience love, companionship and hospitality. May we not forget that the banquet might not always be at the table. The **true** banquet – the true **love, companionship** and **hospitality** we all desire – may in fact be in found in the nameless but great crowd gathered outside.

Amen.