

The Sacredness of This Crowd

January 30, 2022

Crowds

On Monday, I got to be a part of one of the most glorious experiences – the finalization of an adoption. The legal system finally aligned with Leah and Zach Seibel and their children, Audra and Henry, and declared to all that the little girls they've been fostering for over three years are their forever family. The joy in the courtroom was overwhelming. The process wasn't always smooth; definitely wasn't always easy.

Any of you who know Leah and Zach know that they're pray-ers. And so, along with all of the parenting that they did to support the girls' needs, along with all of the endless work that they did to fight for the girls in court, they prayed. And prayed. And prayed.

On Monday, what looked like more than four dozen of their closest friends and family gathered in the rotunda of the Brown County Courthouse, waiting to be let into the courtroom to be able to witness this momentous occasion. When Leah and Zach and their family arrived, the girls were dressed in sparkly cowgirl boots, with plastic leis for everyone. There was no question, this was a celebration. As they greeted all of their guests, I overheard one friend say to Leah, "I've never seen you vibrate with joy before!"

And so, on Monday, I witnessed a miracle. Sure, a lot of human effort went into dotting every "i" and crossing every "t," but no one will ever be able to convince me that what I witnessed wasn't the fruit of God's holy, saving, redeeming love! The energy in the crowd that was gathered was palpable. Not only did we share in the family's joy, we could have moved a mountain. It was like the love and support that we had for the family had an exponent on it, was multiplied, by virtue of us being together.

This experience comes to mind for me as we come together today to celebrate what it means to be church for 186 years. 186 years! Union is the longest continually meeting congregation in the state of Wisconsin. Founded in 1836, first meeting in the surgery at Fort Howard, today we celebrate that for 186 years, under the auspices of Union Church, people have been getting together in the name of God, recognizing that we are better together.

The last two years have posed some unique challenges, to be sure. Each of you have sacrificed so much, both individually and as a church, as evidenced by the fact that the overwhelming majority of you are worshiping with us online today amidst yet another COVID surge.

Personally, I grieve that my daughter's first two years haven't been spent in your arms, being passed up and down the pews. I shed tears that as some truly remarkable souls have left this plane, doing the common good has meant that we haven't collectively celebrated them as we once would have, and their nearest loved ones grieve while also navigating the trauma which is our pandemic experience.

All of this brings to mind our Gospel reading for today. In Luke 4, we read that the crowd gathered in the synagogue was amazed at Jesus' words. They were a little puffed up. He's one of us! It's a classic "local boy makes good story."

(Think of the crowd's reaction here like pointing out that a celebrity is from your hometown. When the show "Monk" was on T.V., I'm sure this town was abuzz with people reminding one another, "That's Tony Shaloub. You know, he's from here." The crowd is proud, a little puffed up.)

And then, with two quick examples, Jesus tells them that their idea of being special, God's chosen ones, doesn't hold water. He points to the scriptures, and reminds them of two instances when God worked through outsiders, not through the in-crowd. In an instant, the crowd that had been crowing at knowing the new young thing turns on a dime, and rather than pride is now fueled by rage.

The Madness of Crowds

The madness of crowds has been well studied over the years. From people trampling one another when hysteria breaks out in a stadium to the horrors of January 6th, the destructive power of crowds is very real.

One of my favorite books of all time is a little play called, "An Enemy of the People" by Henrik Ibsen. It's the story of a doctor in a town whose economy is largely based on the commerce generated by some healing baths. The doctor discovers that they're contaminated and it will take substantial amounts of money to fix them. Over the course of the play, the entire town, including much of the doctor's family and his close friend who owns the local newspaper, turn against him, leaving the reader to grapple with the problems of the tyranny of the majority. In a nutshell, the doctor in "An Enemy of the People," like Jesus in our Gospel today, exposes an unpalatable truth publicly, and is punished for it.

The Sacredness of This Crowd

This fear of the tyranny of the majority, this suspicion of groupthink, weaves its way through the scriptures and has carried through much of my life. It was in one of Michael Lukens' classes that I was first introduced to the idea that it's easier to say what God is not, than to define what God is. This is expressed powerfully through a poem I came across recently by author and spiritual director Jim Palmer:

God is not a belief-system.
Jesus is not a religion.
Christianity is not a check-list.
Church is not an address.
The Bible is not a book of doctrines.
Community is not a meeting.
Grace has no exceptions.
Ministry is not a program.
Women are not inferior.
Our humanity is not the enemy.
Sinner is not our identity.
Love is not a theory.
Peace is not a circumstance.
Self-actualization is not self-worship.
Feelings are not dangerous and unreliable.

Science is not secular.
Sex is not filthy.
Life is not a warm-up for Heaven
The world is not without hope.
There is no “us” and “them.”

And yet, we’re celebrating being a part of a church today, celebrating being part of a crowd, but what makes this crowd sacred and insurrectionists a mob? The subtle yet profound difference comes down to covenant.

In New Member Classes, I explain to prospective members that Union is a covenantal church. That is, we organize around a set of sacred promises. Formally, our covenant is the Bond of Union. Operationally, we covenant to love God, love one another, and grow in holiness.

I often joke that that third commitment, to “grow in holiness,” is our “get out of jail free card,” but in actuality it is what keeps our feet to the fire. The very existence of our church depends on us continually striving to do better by God and by one another. Rather than organizing around a static set of beliefs and practices, we organize around relationship and always seek to be closer to who God created us to be.

Conclusion

And friends, this is the genius of our form of church. Sure, many of you joined because you appreciate the music or the LGBTQ inclusion or the fact that you don’t have to check your mind at the door. But, at the core of this church is a humility that we commit to being led, not by the tyranny of the majority, but rather by the Christ Spirit. We believe that, somehow, by humbly coming together in Christ’s name, the divine will draw us forward into these uncharted waters with grace. And not only with grace, but with hope and love and joy.

This is why our first hymn today was, “Sing A New Church.” Not because I’d love a building that would better suit our 21st century needs, but because we’re calling on the divine to draw us forward, yet again, into what God needs us to be, to inspire us, both individually and collectively, to be about the healing, saving, redeeming love this world so desperately needs.

Union’s 186th year has been a rough one, there’s no denying. But it has been an honor to be your pastor through it. It has been an honor, because I can honestly say that I see you day in and day out striving to love God and neighbor, striving to make the Christ Spirit dominant in your lives, and in all human relations. And so, in a very special way, today I give thanks for the sacredness of this crowd, for the way that we support one another, the way that we love our neighbors as ourselves, the way that we encourage each other toward being our better selves, the way that the good that is in each of us is multiplied by being a part of this crowd. Thank you, and thank God.

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Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30
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