

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
August 30, 2009
Anita Rediger

They Gathered Around Him

Walking out into the heifer lot always makes me think of being surrounded by a crowd of curious people...the cattle are quick to form a circle - pressing in on all sides – with lots of shoving and pushing. As today’s sermon title “hatched,” a variety of images popped into mind. I found myself thinking about occasions when crowds gather. I remember when the boys were of school age. From time to time they would come home excited to tell of a fight on the playground or in the hallway. A crowd always gathered. At Swiss Village, when a young co-worker returns with a new baby on her shoulder - a crowd gathers – folks taking turns admiring the new little one.

In the end zone, at the airport, at the site of an accident, at town hall meetings – crowds gather. People gather to celebrate, to confront, to mourn, to question...and to simply “join the crowd.” Gathering crowds – it’s nothing new – for in our text today a scene change at the beginning of Mark 7 tells us - “Now...the Pharisees and some of the scribes...gathered around him.” “They” – the Pharisees and the scribes – like so many others gathered around Jesus. What was it that drew these various groups to him? Keep that question at hand...

I continue to think about a few short sentences from Ryan Alghrim’s message to us two weeks ago. Ryan said something like this – and he said it several times! *“Something has crept into the church that isn’t the Gospel. Something has taken hold in the church which doesn’t belong.”* Ryan was bold in making this statement and I’m grateful for it – a forthright acknowledgment that the church has allowed something other than the Gospel – to take seats in the sanctuary (and, insidiously compete for the worship of God.) *“Something has crept into the church that isn’t the Gospel. Something has taken hold in the church which doesn’t belong to the Good News of the Way of Jesus.”* The Gospel account this morning helps us to see what this “something” is.

Ryan noted our “double-speak” when it comes to lifestyle issues and our behavior. He reflected that we wish *that someone* would “do something” about the drug cartels of Mexico and the unrest on our southern border, yet America and Europe continue to provide their most lucrative markets – not only for drugs but for weapons. He wryly confessed to gladly buying labor saving devices, grumbling about distant parking spaces while at the same time willingly buying a membership to the gym. Ryan noted that we are extremely good at rationalizing our crazy behaviors especially when we are persons with wealth, status, employment, education...**dominance**; people who really like the convenience and comfort our standard of living! I know that several of us found ourselves squirming as he spoke!

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I believe that Ryan's message challenged us to swallow hard and take look at our "words" of faith and our "practice" of faith. Do our lives flesh out the words we claim as Gospel, as Good News?

Or do we convolute and contort Jesus' healing message into a placard of self promotion? Do we apply Jesus' message of welcome and forgiveness to our lives while withholding it from the lives of those with whom we differ? Does the "good news" which we profess offer healing and hope for *all* persons or only for people "like us"? Now...I'm wondering...would this be a good time to change the subject!!

Well, even if we wanted to change the subject we can't - because it's with precisely such a challenge that our passage from Mark begins! Jesus is surrounded by the Pharisees and scribes who have come up from Jerusalem to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. They have come to gather around him alright, but they have come in order to scrutinize him and to examine the righteousness, that is, *the unrighteousness* of his band of followers.

First, however, let's back track a bit. There were many others who had already gathered around Jesus. In the first chapters of Mark we read of people - with all kinds of troubles - gathering around the door of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Once, so many people gathered around him that folks even removed the roof to get closer to him. *These crowds gathered around Jesus seeking healing - for themselves and for their friends and family members.*

It wasn't only sick people who sought out Jesus. Jesus joined Levi - fresh from his toll booth - at his house for dinner. Many other tax collectors and sinners were also seen sitting around him. These crowds were filled with Jewish people alright, but by physical condition or trade, they were "deemed" unclean and kept on the "fringes." *They experienced true healing - the gift of acceptance and welcome as they gathered around Jesus.*

It wasn't only to Jewish people that Jesus offered hope for a new way of life. Mark records that Jesus went back and forth across the Sea of Galilee - coming and going between the lands of the Jews and the lands of the gentiles. Wherever he landed, he was surrounded by crowds - Jewish people and gentile peoples - crowds with hemorrhaging women, sick children, folks with withered and diseased limbs, persons with disorders of the mind; persons *seeking healing and all yearning for a future with hope.*

But, back to the Pharisees and scribes - in contrast to the others who had gathered around Jesus, they weren't coming for healing. They weren't coming with a sick child on their arm or their own leprous hand. They came as the guardians of the faith, as ones who

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determined what was right and what was wrong, as ones who defined who was “in” and “who” was out. They had noticed that some of Jesus’ disciples weren’t washing their hands properly before eating. (Isn’t this interesting to note right on the heels of the feeding of the 5000? Instead of ceremonial washing of utensils and hands at this great meal, “Jesus took the loaves and the fishes, looked up into heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people.” Mk.6:41)

Instead of marveling and celebrating the provision of food – for thousands of people! - it seems that the religious leaders chose instead to mark that the food hadn’t been prepared properly! (Had they ever been really, really hungry?) Encircling Jesus, they asked, **“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”** Was this really a question? Did they really want an answer of explanation? It seems it was actually an accusation, a pointed charge of unfaithfulness against Jesus and his followers. The small circle of disciples, the crowds of ill and broken Jews, the Jewish tax collectors and “sinners,” the myriads of gentile persons... they were all disqualified by these religious guardians. The religious authorities are disturbed by what *they* name, by what *they* define, as an act of “unfaithfulness” on the part of Jesus’ disciples. I wonder... did these concerned leaders really *want* the disciples to “be faithful” or were they inwardly pleased that they could find flaws in these ordinary people’s faith? Could it be that the disciples’ “shortcomings” caused those in the “inner circles” to feel more righteous?

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?” the Pharisees ask. No matter what they did, ordinary people would never be able to get it right. Life simply did not allow for people engaged in family and farm life to “obey” all the rules. These instructions for proper washing before meals were not to be found in the written Torah, rather they belonged to the ever expanding corpus of oral laws and requirements coming from temple authorities. How could you tend to sick people without being “defiled” over and over again? How could you care for children without coming into contact with bodily fluids- of all kinds! How could it be that even natural discharge from ones own body kept one on the fringes of society? How could the food carried to the field be kept undefiled by dirty hands? However, from places of privilege – with someone else to do the so called “dirty work” came these definitions of faithfulness.

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?” the Pharisees ask. Jesus responds quickly and pointedly. He returns the challenge. Instead of seeking to defend his disciples or to make excuses for them Jesus cuts through the façade of the disobeyed ritual to the heart of the issue. “You’ve gathered around us to find fault. You’ve gathered around us to point your fingers and shake your heads.

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You've gathered around us to keep us on the "outside"...all the while you're defining the rules in order to protect your own interests and your own privilege." In other words, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...teaching human precepts as doctrine." Jesus continues, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!" (Mk 7:6-7) "Your ritual has become more important than true relationships of shalom! Your relationship with the halls of power and privilege has become more important to you than your relationship as religious leaders of God and of these people."

Something had crept into "the guardians" of the faith that was sapping the life out of the ordinary Jew. That same "something" that had taken hold of the Pharisees and scribes so very long ago – is the same "something" that cloaks itself in religious language of today. It seems that the profession of faith had become a strategy to build boundaries, to keep people apart, to determine who was in and who was out. And...it was the ones with power who were making the distinctions! It was those who had accumulated wealth at the hand of the common people that were making the rules. The "holiness program" had become a foil for the imperial powers. As Loren Johns noted last week, it was trouble when the temple became an edifice of political power. It was trouble when leaders of the faith community became bedfellows with the Roman Empire.

It is trouble for us when the American church remains unaware of the "something" that has crept into our worship space that doesn't belong. It is trouble for us when the American church remains unaware of its *locus imperium* – its movement toward greater identity with imperial powers instead of greater kinship with the way of Jesus.

Let's ask ourselves,

- "Why do we gather around Jesus?" Who are we as we gather around?" As we think of the persons who gathered around Jesus, with whom can we best identify – those aware of brokenness and alienation or those who are examining the faithfulness of others? It might be that we see ourselves in each of these ways... which does Jesus welcome most? Whom we can we choose to be?

Imagine hearing that Jesus has come to Lehman Park.

- Would we gather around Jesus to point out the brokenness in others?
- Would we suggest to Jesus that he should make others believe/behave the way we want them to?

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- Would we point out the brokenness in others in order to avoid our own fears of failure?

We could...but, instead...

- Let's gather around Jesus – freely offering to him – first of all -entrance into our own places of brokenness, extending to him parts within us that have withered and fallen faint.
- Let's bring others to gather around him...no matter who they are or where they belong! So that they too may receive healing and hope! Come gather around...

(Group to gather in a circle for sending of Ryan Schmidt).

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“The struggle for justice must always find a way to include its opponents in its vision of the future; just as no disciple is infallible, no adversary is “disposable.” Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man*

“Committed Christian practice brings us to a critical awareness of the dominant ideologies and social structures that shape the world in which we live....raises profound and enriching questions.” Juan Luis Segudo in *Binding the Strong Man*