

**“Encountering Jesus: Finding Agency”**

The Reverend Pen Peery

**Date:** March 3, 2024



During this season of Lent we have been reading and preaching on Scriptures from John’s gospel that tell about encounters that people have with Jesus which leave them transformed. Our conviction is that this is a mark of what it means to follow Jesus as a disciple – that we will be transformed.

We’ve been focusing on individual stories of transformation; today the story has to do with a crowd of around 5,000 people.

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After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’ Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’

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Let me start this sermon with a confession.

It’s a confession that needs a little bit of a set-up.

For a lot of my life – I’ve been accused of being an optimist.

My colleagues on staff have sometimes called me “Pen Lasso” – a nod to the Ted Lasso series from a few years ago, which featured a loveable (and somewhat tragic) hopelessly optimistic American who found himself coaching an English football team.

So here’s the confession: I’ve noticed that I’ve become a bit more of a realist. Perhaps even – gasp! – a little more jaded or cynical.

Maybe it’s my age.

Maybe it is how polarized our politics and our world has become.

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I don't know – but I find that I don't have the same level of optimism when it comes to other people as I used to have.

In this morning's Scripture we hear about the crowd. A large crowd. The crowd was following Jesus – captivated by what he said and did.

In the story, we hear that Jesus went up the mountain after teaching (this is Bible-code for trying get away and have some peace and quiet). The crowd followed him. And then – shocker – the crowd found themselves in a situation where they didn't think they had enough to eat.

I've got to tell you: I don't always have a lot of confidence in the crowd.

Two weeks ago I took my two youngest sons to the season opener for the best team in town: Charlotte FC (our city's major league soccer team). It was Christmas present – and we sat in what is called the “Supporters Section” behind the home goal. They tell you to wear a poncho – because if the home team scores, people in the Supporters Section throw whatever beverage is in their hand in the air which becomes “rain” in the form of water, Modelo, Coke, or Vizzy. We were prepared for that.

What I wasn't prepared for was the unfortunate “education” that my boys received by the raucous conversation that was happening one row behind us among a group of adults who must have either thought that 11 and 12-year-olds needed something more...advanced...than the regular uncomfortable topics covered in 5<sup>th</sup> grade health class, or who were self-absorbed enough to not practice any restraint. Thankfully, we saw what turned out to be the only goal early in the game and left at halftime before the lessons continued.

Sometimes crowds disappoint us because of a few bad apples.

Other times, it's because the whole crowd acts in a way that disappoints. (I think about the picture of Dorothy Counts – the first Black student at Harding High School in Charlotte in 1957 – walking toward the school, alone, with a crowd of white students and parents around her yelling and jeering.)

Sometimes crowds disappoint because they lack courage.

Other times crowds disappoint because they are so divided they can't accomplish anything. (The crowd of our elected officials comes to mind – it seems being elected to Congress automatically renders one helpless to take any meaningful action on matters that have plenty of consensus outside the walls of Congress.)

It can get to the point that you just don't expect very much (or anything) from a crowd.

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John’s gospel says that the crowd that was following Jesus was about 5,000 people strong. That IS a big crowd. I’ve seen a congregational lunch or two in my time, and I know for a fact how much work it is...and how many resources it takes...to feed a few hundred people. It’s hard to fathom what would go into feeding 15 times that amount. I get why it’s called a miracle.

What happens when Jesus is confronted with a hungry crowd is recorded in all four of the gospels. It’s the only miracle that show up in each one.

Since this is a communion meditation and not a full blown sermon, let me just cut the quick: the “miracle” that occurs in each of these stories about Jesus feeding the crowd isn’t that he steps behind a curtain and does some magic trick where he pulls loaves of bread out of a hat. No – the miracle is that Jesus looked at a group of people in need and helped them to trust that what they had collectively was enough.

And, yet, as incredible as that may well be – I don’t think simply feeding 5,000 hungry people with the resources that already existed within the ranks of the group is the most amazing thing that happened in the story. I think it is worth spending a little more time considering who might have been in the crowd to get a fuller sense of what makes this story so miraculous.

I used to think of this crowd of 5,000 people as a monolith. I had this image – probably formed from Sunday School classes and storybook Bibles – of throngs of happy people in tunics sitting quietly on the grass in neat little rows while they patiently waited for Jesus to say the blessing and pass out the baskets of bread and fish. Come to think of it – I kind of pictured an outdoor version of what we do here in our rightly ordered pews when our officers distribute communion. In my naïve imagination – that crowd of people was **united** in their response to Jesus’s teaching, **aligned** in their hopes for the future, **supportive** of one another and each others’ dreams.

But let me ask you something: when have you ever been around 5,000 other people in the same place and had that be true?

This morning Scripture begins with what sounds like a throwaway line: *After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias...*

The reason that body of water is called two different things is because people had different opinions...or perspectives. The old-timers called it the Sea of Galilee...but when King Herod built a new capital in Tiberius (which is on the water), those around that part of the sea called it the Sea of Tiberius. It’s kind of like when

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people watch the same current events on two different news mediums and come to different conclusions...with different language to describe the world as they see it.

We know that within the towns and villages where Jesus shared his message there were people who wanted a Messiah to usher in change with militant force – and others who thought there wasn't much that needed to be changed at all.

We know that some of the people who heard Jesus teach were inspired and motivated – and that there were others who were suspicious and afraid.

We know that among the people who followed Jesus were those who were related to one another – and who shared history with one another – which means that they had dynamics and conflict and awkwardness and love and pain.

In other words, the hungry crowd who were gathered to hear Jesus would surely reflect the same quirks and differences and diversity and divisions that would be the case if 5,000 people gathered today...the particular issues would be different – but the dynamics wouldn't be.

And the **miracle** is that Jesus helped **THAT** crowd of people – with their competing thoughts and interests and world-views – Jesus helped **that** crowd of people to look inward...and to trust that they already had the resources they needed to satisfy their hunger – because that's what God provides...an abundance when we see tend to see scarcity.

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If the whole world was Christian, this would be the place in the sermon where I would say that maybe what mattered in today's Scripture is that people listened to Jesus...and that they finally set aside their own pet-ideas and self-centered-solutions, and – even – set aside the myth that **other** leaders they had projected all their hopes and dreams upon might be able to deliver what they needed to be satisfied.

But we know – in a crowd of 5,000 people, not everyone would be Christian.

That's not the world we live in - that is, almost, never the crowd in which we find ourselves.

And yet – whether we are the majority or the minority – who is to say it doesn't matter if we who follow Jesus decide to trust?

Who is to say that – if we can quiet down our own cynicism, and well-earned-disappointments about people, and tendencies toward thinking that best days are behind – who is to say that if we can instead trust that Jesus **really has given us enough**, that God might just surprise us by the capacity of the people we find ourselves surrounded by?

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I, for one, think that shift in attitude might just inspire those who are Christian (and those who are not) to imagine that there are possibilities we have yet to realize – hopes we have yet to dream.

Indeed, what a miracle it would be if encountering the grace of Jesus would lead us to be agents of God’s transforming love – even as faces in the crowd.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.