



July 10, 2005

Luke 4:42-44
Every Heart Needs a Gate
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Things had been going pretty well for Jesus since he began his work in Capernaum. In the passage immediately preceding our text, we're told that a crowd of people had been following him: "All those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid hands on them and cured them." We are also told that even the demons were confessing that Jesus was the Son of God.

So isn't it a bit ironic that with all of this success in ministry, Jesus sneaks out of town at daybreak and goes to a deserted place? Was it because Jesus was tired and needed a little rest and relaxation? The text doesn't tell us he was tired. In fact, he has just begun his ministry. And this passage ends by telling us that after going to the desert Jesus continued his ministry to the crowds of Judea. No, I think Jesus went into a deserted place to remember who he was. The reason he needed a deserted place is simply because it is hardest to remember who you are while you're around the crowd.

We all live and work around lots of crowds. There is the crowd at work or school, the crowd of friends, the neighborhood crowd and the crowd at the pool or the club, the crowd at church, and the crowd that gets together for family reunions and 4th of July picnics. Sometimes it can feel like your minivan is crowded even if there aren't that many kids in it. Of course there is also a crowd at the grocery store, the shopping center, the stadium, and on the highways. We spend a lot of time around a crowd of people, both known and unknown.

What we don't always realize is that crowds have an agenda for the individuals among them. The crowd wants to tell you not just what to do, or how to act, but who you are. The work crowd defines you by your success and productivity, while the crowd at home tells you that it's your relationships that are core to your identity. So it's not surprising that we live compartmentalized lives trying to be different people at work than at home. The crowd on the parkway doesn't care about any of that and just wants you to keep moving, but even that can seep its way into your self understanding: "I just have to keep moving."

Jesus loved the crowds, and was clear about his mission to serve them all. But he never allowed the crowd to tell him who he was. Just a few verses before our text today, Luke describes the time Jesus went back to Nazareth. The hometown crowd was so proud of all they heard about Jesus. So proud. They were happy to call him the Messiah, as long as he was only their Messiah. Jesus had to feel good to receive so much affirmation from his home. But when he reminded them of God's concern for the Gentiles, the formerly adoring crowd tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. Perhaps that is why he is wary of the adoration and success he has been receiving with this latest crowd in Capernaum. Maybe that is why he went to a place deserted of crowds. Even at this early

stage in his ministry, it is possible that Jesus has discovered the power of the crowd is found not in its ability to coerce but in its ability to allure, to get inside your heart.

Once you allow all of the various crowds you have to deal with in the course of the day to get inside your heart, with all of their conflicting agendas and competing priorities for your life, you will find that the crowds have taken over your life. And the first thing they are going to do is throw overboard the person God created.

Yesterday morning, somewhere in town a man woke up excited to have a whole Saturday free. The first thing he does is head into the kitchen to make himself a cup of Starbucks. While leaning against the kitchen counter, he sees the refrigerator and remembers he has friends coming over for dinner and has to go the grocery store. Since he is going there, he figures he might as well head over to the cleaners, and come to think of it the shoe repair shop, because he wants to look his best for work on Monday if he is going to get that promotion. Thinking about work reminds him of his mother who always says he is under-employed, and then he remembers she has a birthday next week so he had better stop by the drugstore to get her a card. Now he is starting to get frustrated with all of these errands because what he really wants is to get some exercise. Thinking about exercise reminds him to check the morning paper to see how the Pirates are doing. As he does he remembers how much his ex-wife hated baseball, and that reminds him that he has to return a phone call to her lawyer. Now he is worried about his money. Thinking about money makes him wonder if he can still afford to buy his teenage son a new computer, and that makes him wonder what it will take to get this kid to talk to him. That is when he remembers that he is supposed to be coaching little league that morning.

He hasn't even made it through his first cup of coffee, and his day has already succumbed to a chaos of competing agendas. There is no unifying center to his life, no true self that originates in the soul. Instead, his life is actually being constructed, haphazardly, by others who compete for his time, resources, and his heart. He knocks himself out to succeed in all of these identities of friend, employee, son, father, and volunteer not because they are components of an integrated life but because he is always in reaction to the next demand. He has no gate on this heart. He lives not from the inside out, but from the outside in. Anything can get inside his heart and tell him who he is and what he is about as a person.

What this man needs, and maybe what you and I also need, is a deserted place. This is a place away from the crowd of demands. It moves you away from success as well as failure, from affirmation as well as criticism. What you are leaving behind in the desert is the life constructed by others. As you head toward it, you will feel the old tug on your ankles as people beg you to mend their life. But you go out into the deserted place not to save others. You go to be renewed in your own salvation. The desert is a lonely place where you go to be alone with your Creator, the only one you dare allow to define your life.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the desert stands as a place of holy encounter. All the patriarchs, Moses, David, Elijah, John the Baptist, Paul, and even Jesus had to spend time in the desert before they could see their mission in life clearly. And they had to return to the desert often.

To be clear, it is not an easy place. There are no entertainments, which is our preferred form of retreat. There is no one else, which makes it hard to be impressive. The desert often feels sparse and barren - when we prefer abundance. It certainly isn't comfortable. Sometimes the deserted place is even boring. But in the deserted place, you can at least remember who you are, and whose you are. Only when you are clear about that identity can you return to the crowds without allowing them to run your life.

This week we were reminded that there are some in the crowd who are angry enough to blow up subways and busses as people are going to work. How are you going to keep from being terrorized by these people in the crowd? Only by spending time alone with God in the deserted places, for that is where you hear the still small voice that vanquishes all fear.

Obviously, I am using the desert as a metaphor. What does this actually mean for us? It means that you need to create space in your life to be alone with God. It means that you need to know how to read scripture and pray. It means that if this devotional life feels as uncomfortable and dry as the desert, then you are probably doing it right. It even means that the crowd needs you to have desert time with God because, as Jesus knows, you can only keep caring for those in your crowded life if you have something to give them - something that is found only in the deserted places.

Benediction: If you insist you are too busy to be alone with God, you are actually only allowing everything else to be gods. Find a deserted place, and everything else will find its proper place as well. Amen.