

**August 2, 2020 | Summer worship service**

**TEXT: [Matthew 14:13–21](#)**

**TITLE: The Unrelenting Crowd**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

A couple weeks ago, a graphic artist named Esther Pearl Watson drew a picture of a row of houses on a city street that showed how the yard signs and sidewalk art had changed over the past few months. Back in March, during the first days of the COVID-19 shutdown, the signs and sidewalk art said “Thank You” to the essential workers who keep our city going. In April and May, we were bored with being quarantined so we did creative things like organize drive-by birthday parties and graduation celebrations. June was the month in which America reacted to the death of George Floyd, so yard signs and sidewalks were canvases for social activism: Black Lives Matter; I Can’t Breathe; No Justice, No Peace. That same energy carried into July, along with growing worries about whether we will ever beat this virus. Recent sidewalk artists have drawn reminders for us to be patient, to wear our masks and remember that we’re all in this together.

Now here we are in August. Many colleges are online only for the fall semester and Pittsburgh Public Schools are doing remote learning for the first nine weeks of the school year. That means at least another three months of disruption. Another three months of economic insecurity, lost jobs and lost wages, working from home while raising a family. It just keeps coming—an unrelenting crowd of issues confronting us; an unrelenting crowd of people in need who are breaking like waves onto the personal shoreline of our lives. Yard signs and sidewalk art are helpless to stem the floodwaters of this crisis. What can we do to make things better? Can we make things better?

Jesus had just received some bad news. John the Baptist, whom he knew well, had been arrested by King Herod and, as part of the entertainment at a drunken party, John had been beheaded. This troubled Jesus, so scripture says “*Now when he heard this, Jesus withdrew to a deserted place by himself.*” It was also troubling to the people who had known of John the Baptist and who were now following this new teacher from Nazareth, because the rest of the same verse says, “*When the crowds heard [about this], they followed Jesus on foot from the towns.*” Jesus had sought out a place to collect his thoughts, clear his head and pray and what happened? A crowd followed him; an unrelenting mob tracked him down. The needs just never let up.

This past Friday I was sitting in my office answering a few last emails and preparing to go home when the phone rang. A woman I didn’t know began to speak with a voice that was anxious and somewhat agitated telling me there was something evil in her house. It was something she could sense, that brought her pain, and she wanted it out of there, to be exorcised. I knew there wasn’t anything in my Presbyterian training that could help me fully resolve this type of paranormal psychological crisis, so I did what I could. I listened. The woman had been talking to other ministers and priests. She said one came out and then quickly left, and another prayed for her over the phone but she claimed the evil presence inflicted pain on her while he prayed. I worked hard at hearing

her without judgment, asking if she'd spoken with her own pastor or a counselor about this. I mentioned that Protestants don't do much with exorcisms the way that Catholics and Pentecostal churches historically have. The more we chatted, the calmer she got. In the end, I told her that when we hung up, I would say a prayer for her well-being and that she might be free of this torment. It wasn't much except a reassurance that she'd been heard and that she wasn't alone. We hung up and I prayed. It didn't seem like a lot, but it was what I had to offer.

There are so many needs crying out for our attention every day. The newspaper headlines are dominated by coronavirus updates, but turn the page and we read about federal troops unjustly deployed, hurricanes and tropical storms, upticks in domestic violence, continued deaths from opioid addiction, waves of migrants fleeing suffering at home and DACA dreamers here being rebuffed by callous government protocols. There are too many needs, so we learn ways to make excuses or avoid responsibility. We screen our calls to avoid random conversations about exorcisms. We tell the panhandler that we don't have any cash. We quit reading the news and search out another dose of Netflix escapism.

On that day long ago, the disciples looked at the huge crowd that had gathered to hear Jesus speak and prudently noted that it was getting late and he should send away the people to beg or buy food in the neighboring villages. But Jesus' response to them was quite direct: *They need not go away; you give them something to eat.* Despite their best efforts to avoid the obligation of tending to the needs before them, Jesus put this responsibility firmly back into their hesitant hands. *You give them something to eat. This one's on you.*

Now I need to be honest for a moment. The first step of responding by faith is the most challenging one - not because the needs are so great or the crowd is so huge. It is because the first step is to acknowledge that we are part of the crowd too and we are part of the problem causing them to cry out in need. Dr. Rhea Boyd is a pediatrician who teaches at Stanford University. When she was asked how we can solve the health care crisis we find ourselves in, she exhaled and said we first need a government and scientists we can trust; but beyond that, we need large-scale interventions: universal health care, housing reform, higher minimum wages and worker protections. Otherwise, as she put it, we are just tinkering on the margins of a broken system.<sup>1</sup>

William Sloane Coffin was fond of a quote he found in the writings of St. Augustine that says this: *"Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself."* The necessary first step of faith is acknowledging that we too are part of the unrelenting crowd; we too are part of the problem. Evil, hunger, cynicism, despair don't arise outside of ourselves. As Pogo famously said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Nothing good comes by pretending this isn't so.

Back then, Jesus' disciples already knew this. When they went to Jesus trying to dodge their responsibility, only to have it put squarely back in their own hands, they had already counted their supplies to see if they could possibly feed the hungry crowd.

That's why when Jesus said *You give them something to eat*, they could reply *Lord, we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish*. They had already considered feeding the crowd themselves. But they'd decided it was impossible until Jesus himself was added to the inventory of resources.

Now, I'm not here to preach Pollyanna Piety. I'm not here to offer simplistic spirituality that suggests by just praying and trusting in the Lord, all will be well - the bills will be paid; the disease will be cured; the injustice and racism and inequity will disappear. But what I do offer is a call for you to change your perspective and to trust more deeply in God. Jesus heard the disciple's response about how limited their food supply was. Then he told them to look at the crowd—to have them sit down on the grass—and then Jesus blessed and broke the bread before them. And somehow, miraculously, wonderfully, all ate that day and were filled.

A pastor friend of mine, Bill Paul, recently sent me a quote by Ali Tranvik, who is the Lutheran pastor on the campus of Duke University. Rev. Tranvik said that “when we walk through the world with our eyes on our neighbors rather than our own feet, we will surely stumble...But God became incarnate to stumble along with us and gave us something far greater than the false sense of security Christians so often seek. [God gave us radical grace and love] that frees us to walk this uneven ground together, to run to our neighbors in need, to dance with one another [on uneven] streets.”<sup>2</sup>

On that day long ago the disciples first looked away from the crowd, hoping they'd just disappear. They counted up their supplies, decreed they were inadequate and decided there wasn't anything more they could do. Now I don't know what the next months will hold for us. I don't know what yard signs we'll be led to plant in our yards, or what words of encouragement we'll tape to our windows or draw in chalk on our sidewalks. But I do know that Christ will not let us wash our hands of either personal complicity or personal responsibility for those in need. Christ says *You give them something to eat. You do something*. And as soon as our gaze is redirected onto the unrelenting crowd before us, Christ is there in our field of vision. Christ is there as the host at the meal in which all are fed and filled. Christ is here beside us, before us, and with us. Friends, that is good news indeed. Trust and give thanks to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Warzel, “How to Actually Talk to Anti-Maskers,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2020, SR10

<sup>2</sup> Ali Tranvik, “A Victim of the Holocaust Lived Here,” *Sojourners*, May 2020, p. 31.