

May 8, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Revelation 7:9–17](#)

TITLE: **Joining a Great Multitude**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Let's begin with a mental exercise. If you wish, close your eyes and call to mind an image of Jesus Christ—any image—and hold it for a second. Now, there are lots of images of Jesus you could have chosen. Perhaps you picked an old churchy image such as Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane or Jesus standing at the door ready to knock. Maybe you picked something more artistic, like Da Vinci's Last Supper or even the image of Christ carved in marble here in our chancel. My assumption is that likely all the images imagined just now were of a Jesus who was bearded, handsome, and probably more Caucasian-looking than Middle Eastern—which is problematic on many levels and worth some self-reflection—but that is beside my main point for this morning.

When we picture Jesus, we generally picture him alone: Jesus kneeling in prayer, looking up to heaven, or perhaps extending a hand to us. Or we picture Jesus walking with one or two disciples or at table with his close circle of followers. What we don't usually imagine is Jesus in a crowd, which is interesting given how often scripture describes Jesus being surrounded by lots and lots of people. I flipped through the opening chapters in Luke's gospel and almost every story involved Jesus dealing with a crowd of people. Luke 4—Jesus taught in the crowded synagogue and reports about him spread through all the countryside. Luke 5—people were looking for him and pressing in on him so much that he had to climb into a boat and preach to them while they stood on the seashore. Next came descriptions of Jesus telling the parable of the sower to a great crowd of people, or the time when he healed the woman with a flow of blood while a crowd pressed in on him from all sides, or when he literally fed a crowd of 5000 people from a few loaves and fish. We picture a personal, private Jesus; the bible invariably shows a public Jesus out in the world, surrounded by crowds of people. I think this distinction is worth exploring.

Let's begin with the big picture—really big, as in outer space big. Back in 1985, Salman al Saud was the first Saudi astronaut to fly a space shuttle mission. He described his experience this way: *On the first day or so we all pointed to our countries. The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day we were aware of only one earth.*¹ What a gift it would be if all of us could see the earth from outer space—this bright blue marble set against the cold darkness. Compared to the lifeless landscapes of the moon and Mars that we've been able to explore, the earth is vibrant with its expanses of water, mountain ranges, and billowing clouds encircling the planet. Our world is not a dead asteroid but more like a living body in which no part operates independently from the rest. Thinking about the earth as something that is alive—and knowing our survival depends on it staying alive—changes our perspective dramatically.

Second, let's think about this topic not from a scientific perspective but from an economic perspective. As of a few years ago, over \$6.5 trillion moved around the world

in the global foreign exchange market every single day. We think of the world as being divided into nations and separate companies, but the reality is that global corporations and banks operate all over the planet, fairly indifferent to national borders. And a growing number of billionaires now buy social media platforms and influence policies on everything from politics to eradicating diseases. As national boundaries dissolve, who is left to write the rules of fair trade and commerce? Who is able to crack down on polluters of the seas and skies? Who passes legislation to govern the billionaires, to protect human rights or guarantee free elections and democratic means of counting votes in elections? Whose has real authority today—the Supreme Court, the European Union, the United Nations, the Christian church, the Parliament of Religions? Not having a clear answer to that question is unsettling as we picture this fragile, interdependent world we call our home.

Which brings us back to how the bible approaches this subject. One of the biggest shifts in religious history came when the Jewish faith moved from being a regional and ethnic religion to being a global, spiritual religion. Originally you were Jewish by direct lineage from Abraham and Sarah. Some could convert to this faith, but mostly it was something you were as opposed to something you became. God established a covenant with the Jewish people, the 12 tribes of Israel—one that goes back to creation and continued through the tablets given to Moses, the protection promised to the children of Jacob, and the law enshrined in the Torah.

This covenant of love continues today and is the foundation upon which the Christian faith has been built. But the radical move 2000 years ago was to expand this covenant to include all humanity. Revelation 7 opens with an image of a vast number of people, 144,000 to be precise, who were being celebrated by the angels of God. That number stood for 12,000 people collected from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. It was not meant to be taken literally; rather the number 12 symbolized completion—and this vast crowd described God’s protective hand over all the persecuted children of Abraham and Sarah.

But then things shift dramatically in verse 7, where it says: *After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, praising God.* Suddenly we’re back to “crowd language,” a world of global business and international connections, a planet viewed from space that is home to us all. And when the angel in Revelation is asked “Who are the people in this multitude?,” notice who they are not. They are not from one nation or region. They are not descended from one set of mothers and fathers. Instead they are people who in this life have struggled and known adversity. They are people who have known hunger and thirst, literally and metaphorically. They are people who have endured heat and cold and climate change. They have wept tears and longed for a shepherd who could guide them to a place of safety and peace. They are you and me and all of us and all of them—children of God together. Do they all know Christ? That is not stated explicitly in this passage. But what is said is that they are all known by Christ—and ultimately that matters far more.

So how do we get our head around this global perspective of God in Christ—and how do we find a way to join in with this great multitude who are praising Christ the Lamb of God? Well, you know me—as a pianist I tend to approach a lot of faith questions from the perspective of music. I’ve talked before about how difficult Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto is. Its opening theme is simple—a child could master it because it only uses five notes. For the first two pages of the concerto, the pianist plays that simple melody in unison. But then the number of notes doubles—from eighth notes to sixteenth notes. The soloist goes from playing eight notes a measure to 17 notes, then 28 notes every measure. By the time the first two minutes of the piece are done, the pianist has played over 1500 notes. But this devilish concerto is 45 minutes long. That works out to playing well over 30,000 notes, stacked in thundering chords and demonically complicated runs and arpeggios. What are the odds that anyone could memorize that many notes and actually play them in the right order? It seems statistically impossible, yet pianists master and perform the Rachmaninoff 3rd every year.

Here’s the secret to being a concert pianist. You can train your hands to play the right notes, even 30,000 of them, but not if you try to tell your fingers how to hit each and every individual note. At some point you have to forget the notes and just make music—produce the music you hear in your head and which has become ingrained in your fingers. You have to forget the notes, the details, and just trust and let the music come through you.

The book of Revelation describes for us a great multitude of people before the throne of God. It is a global convergence of tribes, peoples and languages, likely a mix of age, gender, race, creed, doctrines, and faith traditions. How do we make sense of something that big and diverse? We don’t. We aren’t called to understand these details. We are called to just trust this vision and by doing that, we let the music of faith come through us and carry us forward.

Maybe when we stop to ponder Christ Jesus and picture him in our mind, we need to see him in a crowd: See him in the distance preaching from a boat anchored just off the shore. See him on a hilltop having a crowd sit down in groups as he passes out fish and loaves. See him with his arms outstretched and people of all types stand before him—and all of them, including Jesus, are looking at us with an inviting gaze. Then the question isn’t what do I need, what do I believe, what are my religious credentials. Rather the question is how can I join this crowd around Jesus—a crowd in which there is someone hungry who I’m now standing beside and whose hunger must be dealt with, someone from Ukraine or China or Somalia who I’ve yet to meet or care about but whose presence I can no longer ignore; a person differently abled than me yet a child of God like me; a woman, especially a woman of color whose physical well-being and rights to self-determination about her body are about to be taken away by activist judges on the Supreme Court?

What if those differences are not stumbling blocks that divide us, but rather the cornerstone of the entire heavenly design? What if I’m not the melody of this concerto but simply one of the many notes that fill the score—necessary for the overall beauty

but not preeminent in any way? What if in letting go of the small picture and opening myself up to the big picture, a global picture, a “God in Christ the creator of heaven and earth” picture, that I suddenly see myself clearly at last—a beloved, redeemed, blessed face in the crowd. It’s not bad being part of the multitude if that multitude is around Christ, now is it?

¹ Larry Rasmussen, Earth Community, Earth Ethics, p. 98.