

Matthew 4:18-25 “Moving Away From Crowd Religion”

In the church year, Epiphany is when we recognize and celebrates the magi’s visit to the Christ Child. We covered that pretty well back in December when we looked at Herod’s role in Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth. The other time we use the word “epiphany” is when we talk about sudden, intuitive perceptions and insights. It’s sort of like a revelation, but it’s different because epiphanies usually happen because of some simple, commonplace experience. Sort of like how Isaac Newton came up with the law of universal gravitation after an apple fell on his head when he was resting under a tree one day.

I had several “epiphany moments” on Sabbatical this summer, which I suppose is the reason one goes on Sabbatical in the first place. Most of my time was spent living out of what I could pack in my pickup truck in places where there weren’t so many distractions. To go back to the Isaac Newton example, I was deliberately placing myself under the apple tree. More specifically I was tying my portable hammock between two apple trees with the hopes that I’d get hit with the proverbial apple. I wasn’t disappointed.

What I was hoping for was a revelation about how to start the 2017 year preaching-wise. With the exception of a couple of churches I visited, I avoided crowds. And this was intentional too. I’m an introvert. And believe it or not, I get a little anxious in crowds. And yet ... a lot of people are called to faith in crowds. In fact, when I think back on it, I came to faith at a church camp in Montana, and I was in the middle of a crowd when it happened. There must have been about 250 campers there. And I was far from the only one who came to faith that week. My guess is that a majority of people who are in the ministry came to faith in a crowd too ... maybe at a revival or camp or at a church service. It may be that the seeds of faith were *planted* earlier, but that actual first step? That’s usually made in the midst of other people. And I imagine it’s not just ministers either. I imagine quite a few people here made a decision to walk in Jesus’ path when others were present.

Here's something to think about: In the Gospels, most of Jesus' disciples ... most of his followers were called out of the crowds. So let's say that the starting point in most of our spiritual journeys begins with our place in the crowd. The scripture Joe read this morning deals with crowds. Right out of the gate in Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus calling Peter, Andrew, James and John. They literally dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus. They went all over Galilee teaching in synagogues and proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom. Jesus started a healing ministry too and pretty soon he started getting a reputation. And as far away as Syria, people started gathering wherever Jesus traveled. And according to our scripture, "the crowds followed him from Galilee to the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan River. And who knows why some of them traveled so far to see Jesus. Some of them, no doubt, were sick and wanted to be healed. Or maybe they gathered around just because it was the thing to do. Maybe they figured they'd be entertained by some of his unusual teachings. The gospel writers wrote about crowds of four or five thousand people ... maybe up to 20,000 gathering around to see what Jesus was going to do.

At this "crowd level" the commitment is pretty low. So is the level of maturity. "Hey, let's go see what this new teacher is all about. Let's go see if he's as radical as some people say he is!" It's like people going to see a concert. Many are there just for the sake of entertainment. They may be moved in the moment, but when that moment passes, so does their inspiration and commitment. There are stories of fickle crowds too. Crowds that gather at the city gates to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem one day, then gather again to call for his crucifixion only days later. Again ... the maturity level when you're caught up in a crowd can be pretty low. The crowd, at least in the Gospels, isn't always a place where the Spirit moves in big ways. In Acts? Sure. But in the Gospels, not so much. It's only when we dare to come forward out of the crowd and make a more personal response to Jesus' call that we start a path to spiritual maturity, which for our sake over the next few weeks we'll call a "Life in the Spirit."

Spiritual maturity isn't something we develop in a crowd. It's something we come to when we step away from the crowd. Now don't get me wrong ... I'm not saying "we don't need church." Church is where we get to make the journey of faith with others. Church is where we are accountable to one another. It's where we live out our identity as God's children ... where we receive a new life-purpose by living out Jesus' ministry in word and deed. But those first steps ... that path to spiritual maturity is something that nobody else can do for us.

Notice that Jesus welcomed the crowds. He knew that the maturity level of crowds is low. He doesn't condemn them though. He knows that a lot of them will come and get whatever it is they wanted for the moment. Healing, inspiration, maybe even entertainment. They remain uninformed or uninterested in holy matters or the deeper aspects of a journey of faith. They just gather up their things and go home wondering when the next celebrity preacher will come through town. They slip in and slip out ... no commitment to anything that's been said or done.

So how many times have we done this? How many times have we sought the safety of the crowd? How many times have we made a conscious decision not to stand out and be different? We don't want to speak up. We just go along with the crowd. Hide and be safe. Blend in. But notice from the crowds who gathered around Jesus, there were those who came forward and dared to make a serious commitment to follow him. They dedicated themselves to his teaching to the point that it changed their lives dramatically. They became different people ... different from the crowd. Maybe their understanding was still a bit naïve, but they took a step away from the world that *was* into a world of *new possibilities*. They dared to seek a new way of living according to Jesus' teachings. They voluntarily turned their backs on the old ways and took the risk of embracing new ways to know God.

See, this step is important, because it's the step from moving away from crowd religion to true, honest-to-goodness discipleship! Discipleship is when we put ourselves in a position of receiving. Receiving what, you might ask? Receiving the Spirit of God so we can begin living a life in the Spirit. And understand that this is just the first step too. It's not the final step. We may think that all of our childhood experiences in Sunday School class or Vacation Bible School or camp gave us all we need to know about the faith. But there's so much more! That's what I love about baptisms. It's a new beginning. It's the "outward profession of an inward confession" as our church founders used to say.

Kayla has made a decision today to walk in faith. She stepped away from the crowd. She went into the baptismal waters as an old creature of the flesh, and emerged as a new creature in Christ! She's not merely an observer anymore. She's not even a follower. She's a disciple, and hopefully one day she'll be able to help others in their journeys of faith too.

Over the next three weeks, we'll be talking more about moving toward life in the spirit. Next week we're going to talk more about what it means to be a disciple. Then we're going to talk about what it means to be transformed. We'll wrap it up by exploring what it means to live in the Spirit every day.