

Proper 11B, Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

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Some say the Scotch made all the difference. But you be the judge.

In May of 1968 a submarine named the Scorpion disappeared on its way to Newport News, Virginia from the North Atlantic. The Navy knew the sub's last reported location, but had no idea why it went down or how far it might have traveled after radio contact fell off. Which meant that the Scorpion could be anywhere in a circle of ocean at least 20 miles wide.

Now, a typical approach to this problem would have been to assemble a few experts on submarines and ocean currents, and have these folks put their heads together and make their best guess as to the vessel's location. But John Craven, the naval officer in charge of the search, tried something different. He decided to keep the experts' heads ... apart, as it were. And he added a few bottles of Chivas Regal into the mix as well.

Craven pulled together a large group of people with expertise in a variety of areas. The group included mathematicians and submarine specialists and people in the marine salvage business and others. But instead of having them collaborate, he had each person place several bets. They were each asked to wager on a variety of possible explanations for the sinking, on the submarine's speed, on its angle of descent as it sunk, and on several other factors that would have determined the lost sub's whereabouts.

The Scotch just made sure that all these little bets were worth winning. It made them matter.

The information was a collection of individual hunches really, based on very little hard data. But John Craven plugged the guesses into a formula that would provide the group's estimate of where the sub ended up. Now, it's worth noting that no individual in the group guessed the location of the sunken sub. But five months after the Scorpion went down, a navy ship found it. It was only 220 yards away from the spot where Craven's group predicted it would be.

Nietzsche said, "Madness is the exception in individuals but the rule in groups." Thomas Carlyle said, "I do not believe in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance." And your father said, "If everybody jumped off a cliff, would you?" His tone of voice suggested a low opinion about the collective intelligence of the crowd you ran with.

But the story of the search for the Scorpion suggests that a crowd can know more than any of its individual members. It suggests that there is in fact, a "wisdom of crowds" to use a phrase of James Surowiecki, who wrote a book by that title. The curious key to unlocking a crowd's wisdom is not always cooperation. It's that each member be free to place her own honest bet, free of any influence by the other betters.

This week our gospel reading oddly skips over a couple of Jesus's impressive individual feats, like the feeding of the 5,000 and walking on water. But in doing so, our attention is turned not to the miracles, but to the crowds. The crowds that located Jesus, we might say. And could it be that those crowds located Jesus in much the same way that John Craven's crowd located that lost submarine?

We just heard that, "As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." "Sheep without a shepherd" sounds like a first century idiom for stupid. We often assume that Jesus is the only one in these stories with wisdom and sense. But Jesus' relationship with these crowds may be subtler than we think.

It's no surprise that Jesus is attracting lots of people. His reputation as a healer is spreading. People with all sorts of ailments are seeking him out. But this is the second time in Mark's short gospel that we've read about a power that was accessed by someone touching the fringe of Jesus's garment.

A few weeks ago we read about a woman who touched the hem of his robe, and when she did, Jesus felt power going out of him. That story suggests that Jesus is not entirely in control of his healing powers in the gospel of Mark. People draw them out of him. They press in against him, touch his clothing and there it goes again. A brush against his cloak is all it takes.

So Mark presents Jesus as something other than an all-knowing and all-powerful individual. Something comes alive in him, or something is accessed and located in him by the crowds of sick people themselves.

If the power in Jesus's ministry is tied to the life of the crowds around him, the fact that these crowds were made up of sick people introduces another element to the story. Part of the force that brought them together was the desire to be healed, which means that these crowds were full of people ready to make a wager.

These stories are not about people who were mildly curious about this prophet who seems to be making a stir. They're about people who are in need and ready to choose. They are sick, and they are ready to wager on what or who might make them well.

The point of these stories may have less to do with the fact that the people coming to Jesus were sick than it does with the fact that they responded to Jesus from that place in ourselves where choices matter. They respond to Jesus out of a place of deep desire. In them, it was the desire to be well. In us it might be something else.

And here's where I wonder if these first century stories share something with the search for a submarine nearly 2000 years later. A naval officer offered bottles of Scotch to ensure that the bet of each person in a small collected crowd would matter to them a little more. Jesus moved among crowds of the sick and the outcast. Did he do so because there is power in people ready to bet their lives on their best hunches about what might be true? About what mattered deeply to them? About where and by whom they might just be healed?

If this is so, the story is relevant to us as well. Because in it we're reminded that, as a community seeks the truth, as a community seeks the healing presence of God, it needs the honest intuitions of each of us about the things that matter most deeply to us. Maybe the first thing you and I can do for each other, for our church, for our country, for our world, is to figure out what those things actually are.

It can be hard to figure out what I truly need and want, because there are so many voices telling us what we ought to care about, and even who we ought to be. But a clarity seems to come with certain states and situations. "Tend the sick," we pray at Evensong, "...soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous..." It's ourselves we're praying for too, of course. We are the sometimes sick, suffering, afflicted, and joyous. And in of all these states we access that part of ourselves where our needs, wants, and desires are clear and true about the matters that matter to us.

So maybe there was just a lot of clearly focused honesty in those crowds of sick people who followed Jesus. For they were made up of people long past caring whether anybody else thought they were fools. They just wanted to be well. And their undiluted desires and faith stirred up a power in Jesus, we're told. A power he couldn't seem to access without them.

One of the best perks of my job is that I get to hear your stories. You have come to take part in this congregation for lots of different reasons, with different experiences, different needs, gifts, and struggles. But what so many who come here seem to have in common is intentionality. Church attendance isn't a given like it once was. Which may not be a bad thing. It means it's more likely that something in your life gave you pause or awakened, and you decided it might be time to entrust some of who you are to this Christian community.

It might have been something difficult—a grief, a loss, a displacement, a loneliness. It might have been something joyful—a friendship, a birth, a new vision opening up for your life. What the gospels seem to tell us is that there is power in a crowd of truthful people who have brought what matters deeply to each of them. Which means nothing may be worse for our life together than for you to feel like there's a single Christian ideal your life needs to conform to. Scripture tell us clearly that something came forth from Jesus only when the people around him each brought their deepest and most truthful needs to him. And that even he had no access to that power when people came to him with traps and clever questions designed to trip him up, as if nothing real were at stake.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that these stories don't suggest that your wounds, joys, and confusions are simply tolerated here. The gospels say a healing power in Jesus gets stirred up by people being real about what they need. People being about real what they want. People being real about what they truly love and what matters most to their lives. Why wouldn't this also true of us, here and now?

Maybe faith, then, is less about believing a fact about God, and more about entrusting God and the people around you with the truth about who you are, your joys and your needs alike.

Christian practices like kindness and confession, forgiveness and forbearance, surely these are meant to clear a space for each of us to more truthful and trusting with one another. And the power of such faith, the power of entrusting someone outside ourselves with the truth about ourselves, has never been just about becoming enlightened, authentic individuals. The healing power of your trust shows up in the one you've trusted, just as it did in Jesus among those crowds of shepherdless sheep who trusted him nonetheless with what mattered most.

So, keep the faith, friends. Which is to say, keep bringing what matters most to your life to the life of this little crowd called Calvary. If such trust can awaken a healing power in Jesus, don't you think it might also awaken God's healing power in the likes of us as well?