

The Crowd Blocking Our Approach to Jesus  
Luke 8:19-21

Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs  
Salem United Church of Christ  
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*Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. Lk. 8:19*

Rope lines and security guards keep pressing crowds from reaching celebrities. Only a few people get close enough to the VIP to get an autograph or handshake. Most often, it isn't the rope line or the security guards who prevent people from reaching the celebrity, it is the crowd itself. It is too deep and too full and too many are jockeying for position. Those in the back get as close as they can but can't get as close as they would like.

Such was Mary's experience one day when she and others in her family tried to get to Jesus. Not even she could get through to reach him. Luke says it was because of the crowd that was around him.

I bring this verse to your attention now because I believe it is replicated today. There are three sets of characters in the text: there is Jesus with all he has to offer; there are those who want to reach Jesus; and there is the crowd that makes it impossible to reach him. Let's look at each of these three in turn.

*There is Jesus with all he has to offer*

Jesus has the help that can get people through torment. Just page through the gospels and you can see the anxious hope on the face of person after person. Luke's 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, the very chapter we are in today, is full of them. They all come to him for help with torment of some kind. There is a man so full of demons that he can scarcely count them (Lk. 8:26ff). Right after him there is a father whose little girl is dying (Lk. 8:40ff). Just after him, and while Jesus is on the way to that little girl's house, there comes a woman, sick for a dozen years, who hopes to touch just the hem of his robe and find the healing no doctor has been able to give (Lk. 8:42ff). People strained to reach Jesus because they believed he had the help that could get them through.

Others came just for the entertainment value. They saw that Jesus had the truth that challenges the powerful – the arrogant, the self-righteous, the hypocritical. They came to watch him out-manuever the Pharisees, get the best of the Sadducees, stump the scribes, and expose the wrong of Caesar and Herod. He could speak truth to power like no other, and people hurried to hear him.

Jesus has the help to get people through torment, the truth to speak to power, and he has the words of eternal life. He could lift eyes above the materialism of the age and show the ideals that are more valuable than things. It is he who can point to the path that really leads to life.

The first and most important aspect of our text is Jesus who is present with all he has to offer: help for life's torment, truth to challenge overreaching power, and the words of eternal life to defeat death itself.

*Those who want to reach Jesus*

The second group in our text is composed of those who want to reach Jesus. In the text, it is Mary and Jesus' brothers who want to reach him. In truth, you are in that group, aren't you? I know I am. We are those whose faces are red with the strain of striving to reach Jesus.

We are those people of the Bible whom we have mentioned. We are the man chained by conflict and confusion. We are the parents who are desperately worried about our children. We are the people who are hoping for healing of some kind, whether for ourselves or for others.

If you do not see yourself in the people of the Bible, perhaps you can see yourself in the people of the hymnal. We could have written half the hymns.

Give me Jesus, give me Jesus,  
You may have all this world, give me Jesus  
*New Century Hymnal # 409*

O let me hear you speaking in accents clear and still,  
Above storms of passion, the murmurs of self will.  
*New Century Hymnal # 493*

Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Christ who changes not, abide with me.  
*New Century Hymnal # 99*

We are those who strain after Jesus, trying to reach him.

So I set it up this way. We are believers who see Jesus has what we need and we are among those who want to reach him. And yet, we have to contend with the third group in our text.

*The crowd that impedes our approach to Jesus*

Now, I have no interest whatsoever in going back through the Gospel According to Luke in an attempt to decipher who was in that crowd on that day to impede Mary and Jesus' brothers. My thought instead is that Jesus is surrounded today with a crowd that is thick, deep, jockeying for position and preventing us from reaching the Lord we want to reach. What is in that crowd? What surrounds Jesus and impedes our approach to him?

Sometimes I think it is the mystery of Christ. Jesus is a spiritual presence, and that means he is an invisible presence. And there's the rub of the crowd that brushes against us and sends us aside. How – we wonder – can we turn to one we cannot see? How can we hear one who does not talk in an audible voice? How can we follow one whose footsteps we cannot trace? How can we give ourselves to one we cannot touch? The mystery of Jesus puts a distance between him and us, and can cause him to seem out of reach, unapproachable.

More often than the mystery of Christ, I think it is the clarity of Christ that keeps us from getting near him. We know the clarity of his commands and so we do not go near him. We know what he is going to say. After all, he told a young man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor (Lk. 18:22). He told the disciples, who were hoping to hurry a poor and hungry crowd away so they could fend for themselves, to give them something to eat (Lk. 9:13). He told people who were anxious about their place in the economy to seek first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33). He told people who were interested in tax cuts to render unto Caesar (Mk. 12:17). He told people who were focused on self-care above all else that the pathway to life is to deny the self (Mt. 16:24). Sometimes it is not the mystery of Christ that keeps people away, but his absolute clarity.

And much of the time it is simple embarrassment that jostles us away. We have that wonderful line from the Apostle Paul: “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” (Rom.1:16) I do not know about you, but I wish that were always true about me.

When I was in high school we had to write a term paper in one of our classes. The paper was to be about the occupation we were hoping to enter. I was already thinking at that time that I might become a minister, but I did not write about becoming a minister. I wrote about becoming a college history professor. I wasn’t lying; I *was* thinking of becoming a college history professor. But ministry was fast becoming my first choice, and I wasn’t ready to have my classmates know I was thinking about becoming a pastor. I wasn’t ready to be perceived as being that religious.

Would that I have outgrown that, but I have not. When Sherrol and I were in England just over ten years ago, representing the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ in our partnership with the United Reformed Church, every United Reformed Church pastor we met wore a clerical collar every day. I thought that was kind of cool. I toyed with the idea of wearing one. There is nothing that prevents UCC pastors from donning clerical collars. But I haven’t and I won’t. I don’t want to call that much attention to myself.

I’ve told two stories against myself. I suspect you could tell stories against yourself. There come days when we stay away from Jesus – not because of his mystery or because of his clarity, but - because we are ashamed of the gospel and ashamed of being ashamed.

What is the remedy? It is in him, not in us. Think of it in this way. When Dale and I were in Washington, DC several years ago, we were in the Russell Senate Office Building. We spotted Sen. Ted Kennedy getting on an elevator several yards ahead us down the corridor. Dale hurried down the hall, hoping to have a chance to meet the famous Senator from the famous family. But just as he reached the elevator, the elevator doors started to close, and Dale turned to rejoin me and tell of a missed opportunity. Just as he turned, however, a huge hand came out of the elevator, held the doors open, and then reached out to shake Dale’s hand. Dale couldn’t reach the Senator in time, but the Senator made sure he reached out to Dale, and he shook his hand.

So a crowd kept Mary and the brothers from seeing Jesus right then. But don’t suppose that Jesus did not look her up later and say, “I heard you were looking for me, Ma. What did you want?”

And so with Jesus and us. We can't get near him sometimes. Now it is because of mystery that leaves us confused; now it is because of clarity that leaves us hesitant; and again it is because of embarrassment that makes us hold back. We can't reach him, but he reaches us. The crowd can stop you, but it cannot stop him. His nail-pierced hand will reach out, open the door, and keep it from closing.