

Awaken 2016 – Israel
Hilary Price
Far From the Madding Crowd

Thank you Josh very much indeed for coming down and being with us on these two days. We look forward to you being with us in the session tonight.

And if you are disappointed that we are indoors, it is cold out there. But I am a hundred times more disappointed because of the beautiful setting, but we have to go with what the weather forecasters tell us and we don't want to be blown away.

I am going to talk tonight – this afternoon actually – about the fact that the weather on Galilee is completely unpredictable. I am going to talk about an event in relation to that.

I am so glad that Hilary is going to speak to us this morning. Many of you know Hilary. She is the mother of my three children and the grandmother of my two grandchildren and two half grandchildren. They are not quite half yet, she says. We have got twins on the way.

But it is fun being married to Hilary. It is not fun actually – sometimes it is. Hilary is as transparent as a sheet of glass and is a woman of absolute honesty and integrity. And I know that because I have lived with her for 36 years now – 36 years last fall – and that has both its comfort and its discomfort. But the discomfort is good and wholesome...

Anyway, let's pray and I will let Hilary speak.

Thank You Lord that we are here this morning in each other's company but above all we want to be conscious of the fact we are in Your company and Your presence. And You are here not as an observer; You are not here to pick out things You want to poke us about, but You are here because You love us, You want to minister to us, You want to speak to us. And although we will hear one voice speaking to everyone, we thank You for the Holy Spirit's voice who will speak personally and directly to each of us.

Give Hilary that rapport and freedom as she speaks to us now and thank You for what You will accomplish in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well Good Morning. I am not sure how you are feeling this morning. I think yesterday we were all kind of full of beans, but because we stopped the manic pace, now we are all kind of ... Well I will speak for myself. I have got a cough and a cold and I didn't sleep very well so, if you are in that boat, I am in it too. So sorry if my voice isn't great this morning. But I think everything is kind of getting a bit screwed up in my head now and last night I was dreaming.

I was waking a lot but when I went back to sleep I kept getting into the same dream and the same dream was that I was just getting on and off buses. And I think when I woke up I thought I will go back to sleep now until it will be different but it wasn't.

And before I went to bed I had watched the news and all the news is about nowadays is Trump. And unfortunately Trump was on my bus every time I went back into the dream. But he wasn't actually the bus captain; he was just in the way. He kept being on the steps with that blonde hair and I was like, "Get out of the way." So anyway I don't know what that's all about but I have a sneaky feeling I know what that's about so...

Anyway, it is great to have the opportunity to share with you some thoughts I have been developing over a long period of time, probably a life-time actually.

But if you have got a notebook and you are making notes and you love titles, probably I would entitle this Far From the Madding Crowd.

I am an English Lit major – I used to teach English literature. One of my favorite authors is Thomas Hardy and Thomas Hardy wrote a book, "Far From the Madding Crowd" and here we are in the middle of the madding crowd.

So I don't know how many of you, when you signed up for this journey, realized that 250 people had had the same idea as you.

I know some folks sign up and they just think it is going to be a cozy little group of about 30 and then they get here and they are pretty horrified at the size of the crowd that they are now in.

And maybe this is the biggest crowd that you - not have been in, because we have all been in theatres and soccer matches and things - but the biggest crowd you have had to move around with every day in your life.

And this morning I am going to talk about crowds and that might seem a little strange. But if you just sit down and read the Gospels, pick one Gospel and read it in one sitting and look for the word crowd, you will find that the Gospels are full of crowds; they are crowded with crowds actually.

And all the crowds are pushing and they are jostling and they are wanting to see Jesus. A little bit like us; for the last few days, we have been all over the place – Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Masada. We have been in crowds; we have been pushing; we have been jostling. We don't want to miss anything and we want to see Jesus.

So I want to revisit this morning the story that Charles spoke so clearly about yesterday when he talked about trust. I want to look at the same story and come from a different angle.

The Bible is a little bit like an onion – you can keep peeling off layer after layer after layer.

So I am going to pull another thread out of this story and I am going to read it not from John but from Matthew Chapter 14, same story.

I hope you underline in your Bible and if you do, as I read this story, every time you see the word crowds, I'd like you to underline it because this is a theme that runs through the feeding of the 5000.

And this story begins after the gruesome beheading of Jesus' cousin John the Baptist.

Matthew 14:11:

“His head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

“John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

“When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and he healed their sick.

“As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a remote place and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.’

“Jesus replied, ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’

“‘We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,’ they answered.

“‘Bring them here to me,’ he said.

“And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks” (Which is what Charles spoke about) “and he broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

“They all ate and were satisfied.”

Down to Verse 22:

“Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.

“After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray and later that night he was there alone.”

So this passage is full of crowds. When I was coming on the plane I just started to read Mark's Gospel and even in the first six chapters it is full of crowds.

Mark 3:7: “A large crowd followed.”

Mark 3:9: “Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a boat ready.”

Mark 3:13: “Jesus went on a mountainside and called to him out of the crowd those he wanted and they came.”

Mark 3:20: “The crowd gathered and so his disciples weren’t able to eat.”

Mark 4:36: “Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat.”

Mark 5:21: “A large crowd followed and pressed around him.”

Mark 6:34: “Jesus saw the crowd and had compassion on them.”

And on and on and on and on. So I think you get the point.

So what do we learn about Jesus and crowds? We are part of a big crowd here.

Well in Matthew 14:13 He attracts the crowd.

Verse 14, He has compassion on the crowd.

Verse 19, He directs the crowd; Verse 19, He feeds the crowd.

Verse 20, He satisfies the crowd.

And then in Verses 22 and 23, He dismisses the crowd, and that is repeated twice.

And I am going to say a very obvious statement, but you can’t get alone with Jesus unless you dismiss the crowds.

So I wonder what relationship you have with crowds. And maybe there are some crowds in your life that you long for Jesus to dismiss.

We have been part of this large crowd now for a week and it will have provided a very different experience for each one of you.

Some of us are introverts and we are at screaming pitch by now. I’m more of an introvert. And some of us are extroverts. Some love the energy of the crowds and they feed off the energy of the crowd, and some find the crowd very threatening and draining.

And some of you will have come on this trip alone. Some of you will have come on this trip very lonely, and hopefully, in the community that has formed on your bus, you have been encouraged by the crowd around you.

But some of you have come on this journey lonely and your loneliness has actually been intensified by the crowd around you.

Some of us love being caught up in a crowd and we like being in a group. We like being herded around. We're always there; we're first on the bus. Some of us are passive aggressive and we are always last on the bus and we don't like being herded around.

Some of us get to the washroom (particularly the women); there is always a big line-up and it is a total waste of time. Others get to the washroom and there is a big line-up and you think it is a wonderful opportunity to make a new friend.

When Charles and I go into washrooms, wherever we are, he kind of pops in and pops out and I appear ten minutes later. He's like, "What were you doing?" Well I was talking to somebody in there.

For me personally, coming on this trip and coming into the crowd has been an enormous challenge. We came away from Canada in September and went back to England, really to be close to my parents. My dad is 94. He is due to have another tumor cut off his head three days after we get back from here. This happened a year ago and I came home for that and now I'm back home again.

My mom has got a lot of difficulties going on in her life at the moment, practical ones. My mom is 86 and this is my mom. And some of you have watched Living Truth, who at the age of 80 did a parachute jump. She – my mom is an amazing woman, and she said to me last week, "I guess I have to say I am getting old." And I forced my mom really to put a stair lift in because she fell down the stairs two weeks ago, the last three stairs.

So it was installed the day after I left and I called and I said, "So how's the stair lift?" And she said, "Oh it's far too slow." She said, "I want to jump off it and see if I can race it to the top of the stairs."

So I said, "Promise me you won't jump off the stair lift."

Anyway, our lives have changed for Charles and I. We have been in the Peoples Church for 15 years. We have had a lot of exposure. It's not something I am comfortable with at all, and now we are living in a little 400 year old cottage which is above a bakery where they have baked non-stop for 200 years. In fact the baker looks like he has baked non-stop 200 years.

And it's like a little stone cave and at night we hear him baking and we smell the baking coming up. And I am very happy because I am hidden.

And then we came back here and you all came pouring into the hotel and I'm like, "Ahh, oh, I can't breathe."

So for me this hasn't been an easy journey and if I'm been a bit kind of quiet around you, that's just who I am and it's been a challenge being in the crowds.

So I have thought about crowds a lot. I have tried to kind of understand how we relate to them, and what Jesus has to say to us about crowds, and what society is saying to us about crowds.

We live in a world that has literally become very crowded. Britain is a very crowded place. The motorways, the freeways; it's like driving on a racing track. And we don't keep the speed limit like people do in Canada.

If you get in the outside lane you need to be going very, very fast or somebody is behind you shunting you out of it. The roads are crowded; the shops are crowded.

And in the midst of all this crowding is an epidemic in our world. It's the epidemic of loneliness.

And when we are surrounded by people, instead of loneliness being alleviated, it is actually intensified. I have done some research and looked at what loneliness in a crowd feels like.

These are just some random quotations, but they might ring a bell with some of us.

"You can be in a huge crowd but if you don't feel like you can trust anyone or talk to anyone, you feel like you are really alone."

"It would be too easy to say that I feel invisible; instead I feel painfully visible and entirely ignored."

And Rudyard Kipling said, *"We are all islands shouting lies to each other across a sea of misunderstanding."*

It sounds a bit hopeless, but there is hope. There is hope in a crowd and a lot of you will have discovered this hope.

Sylvia Plath who is a very depressing woman actually said, *"So many people are shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully if only you were interested in them."*

And sitting on your buses are 50 whatever little boxes and some of you will have found if you just get alongside somebody and say, "Tell me your story," you have unwrapped an amazing person and an amazing story.

But we have to be willing to allow ourselves to be found in a crowd and to admit that we are lonely and we want to be found.

This is a quote from the book, *White Oleander*: *"Loneliness is the human condition. Cultivate it. The way it tunnels into you allows your soul room to grow. Never expect to outgrow loneliness. Never hope to find people who will understand you, someone to fill that space. An*

intelligent, sensitive person is the exception and the very great exception. If you expect to find people who will understand you, you will grow murderous with disappointment.”

And there are a lot of people in the world are murderous with disappointment because they have never found anybody who really gets them, who really understands them.

We have to be very careful we don't enter crowds to consume other people. I don't know when you came on this trip if you said, "Lord, make me a blessing," or if you said, "Lord, give me a blessing – bless me."

"I was always holding onto people," someone said, *"and they were always leaving."* And that might be your experience in this crowd.

You might be finding the trip hard and you haven't actually worked out why it is so hard. And you might be hesitating to make friends because you know that you are all going to part.

And you might be feeling visible but ignored and you are longing for somebody to open up your box. You are longing to tell your story but nobody has actually asked you yet.

This is from the Secret of Staying in Love, *"It is an absolute human certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being."*

You are very fortunate if you have grown up and known the mirror that makes you feel a beautiful person or a friendship or a family relationship or a marriage that reflects back to you something positive.

You are very fortunate if you have a father like Brett, and Brett talked yesterday about how he clamored alongside both his sons into their bed told them that he loved them because he loved them because he loved them.

My father loves me but he has never done that. My father has never got on my bed and laid alongside me and probably that's the same for a lot of you.

If you haven't had a mirror that has reflected back to you something positive, then you have probably grown up being quite a lonely person.

So does that mean we are going to be condemned to be lonely for the rest of our lives? Well no, because thankfully there is another mirror. And Scripture is described as a mirror. When you look into Scripture you see, looking back at you, your own soul.

And in Scripture we discover there is one loving, caring, fully human, fully God, Jesus who can love us with a love that satisfies our souls and unpacks our loneliness.

Jesus spent His whole ministry surrounded by crowds. And in the midst of the crowds He was the Good Shepherd. He was constantly looking and seeking the lost sheep.

So if you are one of those lost sheep, how can you trust Jesus, how can you know that He understands loneliness?

Well because Jesus experienced the loneliest loneliness that a person experienced. We all went to the Garden of Gethsemane. At the Garden of Gethsemane when He desperately needed His friends around Him, they were asleep.

And then of course Jesus hung on the cross. And as He hung on the cross, the crowd mocked Him and insulted Him.

And in His loneliness and in the dark, He couldn't see God; He couldn't feel God and He couldn't hear God. And He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

That's the deepest, darkest, loneliest. The crowds had all turned on Him. The disciples had all left Him except John. And then He cries out, "God, have You forsaken Me too?"

And when Jesus has nowhere else to turn and He has nobody else to turn to, He commits His life to the One He can't see any longer. And maybe that's where some of you are.

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

That's the language of trust that Charles talked about yesterday. "Why have You forsaken Me?"

And Jesus died in the dark without hearing the answer to that question. "Why have You forsaken Me?"

In the dark, in the loneliest moment, Jesus chose to trust the God He could no longer see. And Jesus entered that loneliness; He was drawn out of the crowd; He hung on a cross, forsaken by God, so that you and I would never have to be forsaken by God.

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

"My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Because He did that, He now says to us, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." He came to earth to live with us, among us, so that He could live within us by His Holy Spirit.

And if you only have a Jesus that you think lives with you and walks alongside you and you don't understand He lives within you, I am pretty sure you are lonely.

And one of the ways of avoiding loneliness is to bury ourselves in the crowd. Zacchaeus buried himself in a crowd, but unfortunately the crowd got between him and Jesus and it prevented him seeing Jesus.

And the crowd in your life usually prevents you seeing Jesus.

Luke 19:3:

“Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.”

So I wonder what crowds you can't see over in your life, what you hide in, and why you hide, and what crowds are getting between you and Jesus.

It is very subtle. We allow crowds, the noise, to mask pain. And they are not necessarily crowds of bad things – they can be crowds of good things. They can be busy church activities, busy family activities.

But most people now are just too busy and the busyness is connected with the loneliness. The busier we get the lonelier we get.

Why are we all doing so much?

Well maybe we are simply avoiding dealing with the hurt that we have and if we just keep busy we don't have to think about it.

Some of the busiest people in the world are the laziest people in the world. They look so active and actually busyness has become a virtue in our society. It is not a virtue; it is an imbalance.

And the busier you are on the outside, often the lazier you are on the inside. You refuse to get alone with God. You refuse to do the work about the difficult things in your life. You just keep busy so you don't have to think about them.

And there are many, many crowds to hide in. We hide in social media. We have a crowd of friends on Facebook, but we jump into that crowd in a moment that we have to ourselves because we don't want to feel isolated; we want to feel connected.

We get in the car; we immediately put the radio on. We crowd the car with sound.

We crowd our lives with things. We crowd our lives with food because it gives us a pleasure sensation but it does not satisfy the deepest hunger in our lives, which is expressed through the human condition of loneliness.

Maybe you always put the television on when you are on your own in your house to just have noise around you.

We all live with crowds all around us and within us. And so did Jesus. So how are we to deal with crowds, and what is my relationship with Jesus when I am part of this crowded world?

Well, if you look through Scripture, Jesus sees individuals in the crowd. He comes to find people in the crowd and then He invites us to come out of the crowd, which is scary but absolutely essential if we are going to have a meaningful relationship with Him.

So how does Jesus get us on our own? Well He actually uses the very things that make us want to pull away. When Jesus gets us on our own He does it through suffering, heartbreak, temptation, disappointment, sickness, grief, thwarted desires, broken friendships.

He gets us on our own so that He can teach us. And the very things that seem to be a disaster in our lives are the things that, if we will allow them, will lead us to Jesus.

We will find our way through our loneliness to the Lord Jesus Himself. And the loneliness will draw us into Him.

Once Zacchaeus had climbed up his tree and come down from his tree and let Jesus into his lonely little life and his lonely little house, Jesus held up the mirror of love to Zacchaeus and said, "Today salvation has come to this house."

You might have come on this trip with a lot of disappointment. You might have come with a lot of grief. I know a lot of you have lost your loved one in the last year or the last few years. And you might have felt disappointed that you haven't been able to talk to anybody in a meaningful way about it.

I want to quote to you from the very popular book and film, "Eat, Pray, Love." Whatever you think about it, it is touching a nerve in people's lives.

Elizabeth Gilbert says, "*When I get lonely these days, I think, 'so, be lonely Liz, learn your way around loneliness. Make a map of it. Sit with it. For once in your life, welcome to the human experience.'*"

But listen to this: "*Never again use another's person's body or emotions as a scratching post for your own unfulfilled yearnings.*"

Because that's what loneliness does. It makes us go looking in the wrong places. And Jesus is saying, "Come to Me. I am the only One who will ever, ever satisfy you."

We have to come out of the crowd to be alone with Jesus. Jesus had to come out of the crowd to be alone with His Father.

Matthew 14:23:

"He went up into a mountain apart to pray. When evening was come, he was there alone."

(Probably on this hillside behind us.)

Andrew Murray says, *“The man Christ Jesus felt the need of perfect solitude, Himself alone – entirely by Himself, alone with Himself. We know how much intercourse with men draws us away from ourselves and exhausts our powers.”*

So we are drawn away in the crowds, and we are not willing to connect with ourselves. And when we are alone we are forced to.

I love this beautiful meditation from George Matheson. It is old English but it is beautiful.

“My soul, practice being alone with Christ! It is written that when they were alone He expounded all things to His disciples. Do not wonder at the saying; it is true to thine experience. If thou wouldst understand thyself, send the multitude away. Let them go out one by one by one till thou art left alone with Jesus.

“Practice that solitude, O my soul! Practice the expulsion of the crowd! Practice the stillness of thine own heart. Practise the solemn refrain, ‘God and I! God and I!’ Let none interpose between thee and thy wrestling angel! Thou shalt be both condemned and pardoned when thou shalt meet Jesus alone.”

And that was the wrestling I talked to you about, the wrestling – condemned, the nestling – pardoned.

Crowds can be very attractive but Jesus never played to the crowd. He knew the crowd. He knew as quickly as they came and supported Him they would go or they would turn and criticize Him.

He was not dependent on the crowd. He was very wary of the crowd. Sometimes He delighted them; sometimes He enraged them; sometimes He welcomed them. Sometimes they came to Him and in their midst was a betrayer.

Luke 22:47:

“While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them.”

He often spoke very bluntly to the crowds.

Luke 11:29:

“As the crowds increased, Jesus said, ‘This is a wicked generation.’”

He knew how fickle they were. He knew their thoughts.

The crowds in our lives are very fickle. He knew how easily they could influence each other and whip each other to do things that, if they were on their own, they would never do.

People behave very strangely in crowds. And it was actually the crowd who brought about the death of Jesus. Pontius Pilate, we are told, was afraid of the crowd, and therefore he freed Barabbas and he condemned Jesus.

I wonder if you are afraid of the crowd. See, Jesus does not have relationships with crowds. He does not have a relationship with Bus 3 or Living Truth Tour 2016; He has relationships with individuals.

Luke 11:27-28, He heard a woman cry out in the crowd.

He heard a man in a crowd (Luke 12:13) ask Him to help him with a problem. Someone in the crowd said to Him...

Jesus knows this morning who is hungry for Him in this crowd. And those who are hungry for Jesus will make their way through the crowd to Him, whatever it takes.

To be transformed by Jesus we actually need to touch Jesus. And you are going to do a beautiful reflection this morning on the woman who made her way through the crowd to just touch Him, just touch Him. And then He says, "Who touched Me?"

I wonder if this morning Jesus will be saying, "Who touched Me? Who touched Me in this crowd?"

You can hear things from God in a crowd but you won't learn from Him unless you get alone with Him and talk to Him about those things.

Mark 4:10:

"When he was alone, the Twelve asked him about the parable."

When was the last time you asked God a question - a question, a burning question - and He led you through truth through His Word.

We continually read things like, "Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them," (Luke 18:31).

Luke 12:1:

"Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying:"

In Matthew 14, where Charles was yesterday, we see how Jesus functions in the middle of a crowd. In Matthew 14 there are so many things crowding in on Jesus and He simply walks out His normal rhythm of prayer with God.

Verse 13, He comes to God when He is hurting in the midst of grief, grief crowding in on Him. When Jesus heard what had happened about John the Baptist He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.

He came when He was hurting in the crowd, He came when He was exhausted.

Verse 23, in the midst of a crowd, He dismisses them. He goes up to the hills and He begins to pray.

He came to God when He was hurting, when He was exhausted, and when He was overwhelmed in the midst of everybody's need (Verse 31).

Because so many people were coming and going they didn't have the chance to eat and He said to them, His disciples, "Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet a place and get some rest."

I think that is such a beautiful invitation.

And Jesus has called us into the same relationship that He had with the Father, an abiding relationship. "I will abide in you; you abide in Me." However crowded it gets, we can be in the eye of the storm, in the midst of it all.

And it sounds so simple but it is so difficult to detach from the crowd.

I don't know where you go when life is too sad and it's too much and it's too hard. Maybe we are so focused on the crowds in our lives that they are sucking the life out of us.

A lot of you have responsibilities and so you are no longer acknowledging your own need; you are just pouring into other people, crowds of children and grandchildren and workers and your congregation and friends and members of your church.

But we need God and we need to come alone with God.

All of you flew here on an airplane and all of you will have heard the same announcement that I heard and you hear every time you get on a plane. And it says, "In the event of an emergency, an oxygen mask will fall from the ceiling."

And then it says, "Put your oxygen mask over your face and secure the straps and then put your child's oxygen mask on."

You see the problem with a lot of us is we are not putting our oxygen mask on first. We are trying to put everybody else's – she needs this; he needs that. And we are not actually breathing in and having a relationship with Jesus.

Put your own oxygen mask on first because if you are dead you are not going to be able to put your child's oxygen mask on.

So many people are serving but they are starving. They are actually completely running on empty. They are just giving their own talents; they are not giving Christ to people. You can only give what you have received.

Robert Murray McCheyne who died as a young man, but he was a phenomenal preacher said, *“It is so easy to spend so much time in service for the King that we no longer spend time with the King.”*

Which means we have to get away from the crowds. And Jesus has called us into communion. He appointed His disciples that they might be with Him and that He might send them out (Mark 3:14).

You have got to be with Him before you are sent out: communion; commissioning.

How is your “with Me” relationship with Jesus going? Do you actually spend time alone with Him or are you just hidden in the crowd, observing from the safety of the crowd, never hearing His voice because of the noise of the crowd?

If that is you, I wonder what holds you back from taking that step into aloneness and hesitating when you hear this, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest”.

There is no rest unless there is a “Come to Me” experience. And it is “Come to Me all you.”

It is not “y’all”; it’s not everybody all come together. It is you personally.

And it is probably fear that holds us back. Solitude is the cure to loneliness. It sounds like a contradiction. There is an enormous difference between solitude and loneliness. We can hide in God instead of hiding from God in the crowd.

One of my favorite writers is Henri Nouwen and I think his insights into solitude are very, very helpful. I want to just quote what he says happens when we get into a place of solitude and why it is such a difficult place to stay.

And some of you will have discovered this in your alone time yesterday. This is exactly what will have happened to you.

“Solitude is not an easy place to be since we are so insecure and fearful, that we are easily distracted by whatever promises immediate satisfaction,” says Henri. *“Solitude is not immediately satisfying because in solitude we meet our demons, our addictions, our feelings of lust and anger and our immense need for recognition and approval.*

“But if we do not run away we will meet there also the One who says, ‘Do not be afraid; I am with you and I will guide you through the valley of darkness.’ Let’s keep returning to our solitude.”

You see when you try and sit down and be quiet, your soul starts to scream and all unresolved issues come bouncing up to the surface and then you try and push them down again.

But don't push them down again. This is the wrestling in the dark; this is allowing all the kind of stuff to rise to the surface and show it to Jesus.

Mike Bickle has written a book, "Seven Longings of the Human Heart" and he talks about the difference between solitude and loneliness.

"The Father is the One who first observed that loneliness is not good for the human spirit, remarking in Genesis 2:18 how it is not good that man should be alone.

"This truth was not communicated as a criticism of solitude in seeking after God in private, but regarding loneliness. There is a huge difference. The human heart craves intimacy. Therefore the enemy seeks to exploit this by bringing us down many avenues that offer a counterfeit intimacy, which in turn brings shame.

"The irony is that when we accept what the enemy offers, we minimize our chances of experiencing real intimacy, leaving ourselves open to loneliness even in the midst of the multitudes.

"In loneliness Satan can destroy people much more easily."

There are a lot of temptations to satisfy lonely people. The world of pornography is full of lonely people longing for intimacy and not being willing to acknowledge the source which is loneliness, the human condition, and wanting a quick fix rather than doing the hard work deep down in their souls.

And that's where that quote from "Eat, Pray, Love" is so profound when she says, "Never again use another person's body or emotions as a scratching post for your own unfulfilled longings."

Loneliness is the very thing that God will use to bring you to Himself, to get you on your own, get you away from the crowd, whether it is on the mountain, in the desert, in the night, in a cave, by a brook, in a garden.

Search the Scriptures and look at all the places where God encountered people on their own. Jacob wrestling in the dark, Hagar in the desert, Samuel woken up in the house of God where nobody heard the voice of God until God spoke to him; Mary by the empty tomb; Moses up on the mountain in the dark.

These are lonely places where people were willing to stay until they encountered God. And they did not go running off to a substitute.

I don't know if you know this place, I don't know if you know the darkness of loneliness. I do. I used to think the dark was something to be afraid of. I used to think it was something to run

away from. I no longer believe that. It is in the dark that I have had my deepest encounters with God.

I hear some people say what you learn in the light don't forget in the dark. And I would actually reverse that completely and say what I've learned in the dark, I don't forget in the light.

You see God gives us treasures of darkness and He gives us Himself, an intimacy with Himself.

And Jesus searches for lost lonely people. This whole region; He went looking for lonely people, a despised woman filling her water pot in the region of Samaria (which we haven't gone into – it's in the West Bank, but I went to it last time I was here.)

An invalid – we went to the Pool of Bethesda – that terrible name: invalid; in-valid, marginalized, lonely.

Jesus climbed over piles of crippled people to heal one man. And when He got to him, He asked him that ridiculous question, “Do you want to get well?”

Because this man, as Jesus approached Him, was saying, “I am looking for somebody else to help me. If only somebody else would get me into the water but when I try and get there everybody else gets in the way. The crowd is too much. I can't get there.”

And in the end it is between you and Jesus. Stop using so many excuses about why you can't get there. “Do you want to get well?” He says to him.

One of my favorite characters in Scripture is Nicodemus. Nicodemus has the courage to step away from the crowd and his colleagues and his contemporaries and goes searching for Jesus in the dark and asking Him difficult questions. That was an enormously brave thing to do.

Never be too proud to ask Jesus questions. And because he asked Jesus questions, one on one, alone with Him, he was given incredible answers that we all know.

“How can man be born when he is old?” he asked. And Jesus said, “You must be born of the Spirit.”

And then Nicodemus said, “How can this be?”

And eventually Jesus said, “God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son.”

We would never have that statement if Nicodemus hadn't kept asking the questions.

See, some of us love the crowd and we need the affirmation of the crowd and we are very enamored with the crowd. This is the world of celebrities – very dangerous world.

But He calls us out of the crowd, out of the public arena, where we don't find our significance from what people think about us or say about us.

Matthew 6 is a chapter on living a private life with God, not a public one.

He tells us there, “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. When you give, don’t do it so you that you will be honored by others. Give in secret when you pray; don’t stand on the corners like the hypocrites where all the crowds are, to be seen by others. Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

Do you have a “Your Father who sees what is done in secret” relationship? Is anything done in secret or do you have a public Christianity and no private relationship at all? You pray in public, you go to church. But when you leave there is nothing – nothing between you and God.

When you fast, don’t look somber as the hypocrites, trying to get people to say, “Oh look, aren’t they holy - they are fasting?”

No, He says; make it so it’s not obvious so Your Father who is unseen will see what is done in secret.

We live in this seeing world of people wanting to be seen.

You see, when God gets you on your own, you are who you are. When you are alone with Him, that’s you. And we don’t need to be afraid of being seen. We don’t need to surround ourselves with the comfort of the crowd.

We don’t need to be afraid of thinking that nothing has any significance unless 50,000 people see it. This photo I just took has no significance unless I whip it across the world and let all my Facebook people see it.

It’s such a dangerous world. Things have significance because between you and God, He sees and He knows and He loves and it’s a secret. Therein lies the significance; not because you have 20 ‘likes’ on something you posted - very subtle, very dangerous temptation.

But what if I let Jesus see the real me? Jesus loves us so much that He will accept us as we are, but He leaves us too much to leave as we are.

But the starting place is as we are. That’s just the starting place.

And I am going to finish with a simple story that is about a man who steps out of the crowd to encounter Jesus even though it is a very painful thing to do.

I started where Charles started in Matthew 14 and I am going to finish where Brett finished actually – I haven’t liaised with these two men, but this story about the man with the withered arm is where I also planned to finish my message.

I am going to read to you, and this time from Mark Chapter 3. And look at this man now in this story in relation to the crowd and what the man has to do.

Mark 3:1:

“Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand.

“And they” (that’s the Pharisees who had just been in the grain field with Him) watched Jesus to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

“And he said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come here.’”

And he said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent.

“And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.”

This was in the synagogue in the midst of the crowd and Jesus protects the man with the withered hand from the Pharisees with the withered hearts who can do nothing but criticize Jesus.

But under criticism, under the view of the crowd, under the assumptions of the crowd, Jesus is compassionate. He doesn’t resort to the same sort of criticism back that He is receiving. He is not crushed by criticism, the opinion of the crowd. Why is that?

Well it is simply because Jesus knows who He is. And He knows who He is because right from the beginning of His ministry when He lined up with crowds of people to be baptized and He stood in the middle of the crowd and He stood in the water, God couldn’t contain Himself and He shouted to the world, “This is My Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus never looked to the crowd to tell Him who He was. That was because God had done the reverse. God had told the crowd who He was.

Who tells you who you are? Who told you when you were a child who you were? Was it the crowd at school? Was it the crowd who said to you, “You are not one of the cool kids; you are not one of us, you are not sporty, you are not arty, you are not clever, you are not cute?”

They have these disgusting awards in North American schools: “the person most likely to succeed.” Who says? On whose criteria?

So we get these labels on us and we come out of school and there is only one person most likely to succeed, so there are hundreds, crowds, who feel, “Well I wasn’t, I’m not picked, I wasn’t the most likely to succeed.”

And many of us start to live lonely lives which began in our school days because the crowd told us who we were.

Jesus allows God and not the crowd to define Him and we need to do the same. I am God's beloved in the midst of a crowd, in the midst of the world, in the midst of the Peoples Church, in the midst of loads of people. I know who I am because God has told me who I am.

Why does Jesus make this man make his way through the crowd? He could have gone through the crowd Himself, Jesus; He could have gone to the man. He could have put His hand on the man's withered arm very quietly without anybody seeing it.

Why does He make the man force his way through the crowd and come to Him and stretch out his hand? Can you imagine how humiliating that is? This is the most disgusting, withered, shriveled part of his life and Jesus is saying, "Let's all just see that."

See, Christians are very keen to hide the shriveled parts of their lives. If ever you go to an Alcoholics Anonymous group, they introduce themselves by saying, "I am Fred and I am an alcoholic." And everybody is mutual.

But Christians don't do that. We seem to think that we have to keep our little shriveled hands covered up.

And Jesus says, "No, you come in front of the crowd and you will put your arm out and I will heal you and I will get the glory."

See, when Jesus transforms your life and everybody knows you are a person with a withered life and a withered marriage and a withered whatever, and then you change, then everybody sees it.

In order for Jesus to change your life, you have to be willing to stretch out the withered part so that He can touch it.

He can't touch it if you keep it all bound up and hidden away. And if we are wounded, our instinct is to cover it up, to protect it. The deformed parts of our lives embarrass us.

There is a model in Canada at the moment; she has a disease which makes her skin brown and white. She refuses to hide. She puts herself out there – very brave thing to do.

You see, the shriveled areas of our lives bring shame and we want to pretend that they don't exist. We don't want to expose our shriveled marriage, our shriveled work, our shriveled hopes, our shriveled dreams.

And Jesus says, "Until you do, I can't touch them. I can't touch them. You have to stretch out your hand. Come out of the crowd and stretch out your hand."

And you might say, "Well I can't identify that area in my life."

If you go to the doctor and he says, "What's wrong with you," you usually say, "I don't know," and then he asks you another question, "Where do you have pain?"

So where do you have pain in your life? That's the area Jesus is saying, "Stretch it out. Let's look at that together."

Jesus doesn't scatter pixie dust on the crowd and it's all going to flutter down and land on you and heal your specific area.

He asks you to do something: stretch out your hand, pick up your mat, drink the living water, say you want to be healed, get out of the tree, one on one with Jesus.

So what is the crowd that is stopping you seeing Jesus? What is the crowd between you and Him? Is it self-justification? Is it excuses?

This morning when you go off alone you are going to have the chance to come out of the crowd and maybe God will dismiss the crowd – the crowd of fears, the crowd of doubts, the crowd of self-loathing thoughts, the crowd of angry recriminations, the crowd of bitter wounds, the crowd of responsibilities, the crowd of unfulfilled longings, unheard prayers, worries, fantasies, exhausting ambitions, memories that won't heal – they are crowding in on your soul.

"Come out of the crowd," Jesus says, "and let Me dismiss the crowd, so it's just you and Me and I will test you in this hardened place, I will touch you in the hurting place, I will teach you in the hungry place and I will transform you in the hopeless place."

He saw the crowds and He had compassion on them. And He dismissed the crowds and said, "Come to Me."

This morning is an opportunity for Jesus to dismiss the crowds in your life but you have to come through the crowd, the crowd which is compounding your loneliness, not comforting you, allowing yourself to be found in the crowd, hidden, but not hidden from Him, allowing your loneliness to lead you through the crowd to Jesus Himself.

Psalm 139:23:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts."

The crowd in my head – and they will not leave me alone.

If the little boy had never come out of the crowd, had never given what he had, he would never have seen it multiplied.

If Peter had never stepped out of the boat on this water, the crowd of disciples, not detached himself, he would never have walked on the water.

And in your life you might be missing a miracle because you are hiding in the crowd.

You might be missing healing because you are hiding the withered part of your life in the crowd.

And you might be missing intimacy with Jesus because you are looking for it in all the wrong places and your loneliness is giving you a hunger that is not satisfied.

He alone will satisfy.

It is time to dismiss the crowds in our time here to be alone with God so that He can dismiss the crowds within you. Send the crowds away, it says in this passage.

So we are going to go into our reflection time. First we are going to do the room tone like we did yesterday and then I am just going to re-instruct you and remind you how we go into the reflection time which will be beautiful outside this morning.