

I've had this conversation a couple of times over the last few weeks, I think as we hear about vaccine ramp-ups and the small glimmer of hope that seems to be shining ever brighter that things are shifting towards the positive in our world, we're starting to think about what life looks like...*after*. After all of this. After things change. After some things can go back to normal. But that's just the thing, I'm not sure how our brains are going to be able to handle a return to some of our old ways. Hence the conversations I've had this past week or so...conversations about...crowds.

I don't know about you, but for me, for my brain now a year into this, when I see any level of crowd on television now, I have this small flair of panic, like that is *waaaaay* too many people. It happened in such jarring clarity during the Super Bowl that I didn't know what to do with it. The Bucs stadium wasn't even half full and my mind was like nope, too many, don't do it, but then you see clips of sporting events from before this year and you realize that half full stadiums are nothing compared to what we used to do. I mean I of all people should be like ready and raring for a full blown return to our pre-Covid sports world. The idea of being in a stadium, the live and in color sounds and feel of the game, but the idea of that many people? It's unsettling. And it's really weird, because for our whole lives,

crowds were simply part of our existence, but now...they feel like this looming thing on the horizon that we don't know how to deal with.

I mean I even remember a few months ago when we were at Busch Gardens and a teeny tiny crowd had gathered to listen to one of the bands and I said, "This is way too many people." Me the person who usually loves the hustle and bustle and jostle of Disney World in the peak of summer declared this miniscule crowd at Busch was too much. And it just makes me wonder, what are we going to do when we're back to being surrounded by so many people? How are we going to handle the idea of all those people? It's an apt question as we look at our lessons for today, because as we inch ever closer to Holy Week and Easter, it becomes steadily more apparent to us and to God's people that what is about to happen isn't just for some small group of people, some half capacity stadium of people, but for everyone.

We find Jesus this morning near the end of his journey. From here on out there's no slowing down, there's no stopping, because he's arrived at the center of the action. Our gospel takes place in the immediate aftermath of John's narration of Palm Sunday, so Jesus has just been welcomed into Jerusalem triumphantly, with shouts of, "Hosanna" and palm branches waving. There would have been people *everywhere*. Jerusalem on a good day is a busy place, bustling with people from every corner of the ancient

world, but Jerusalem in the days before Passover? It would have been a madhouse. Jerusalem in the days before Passover after Jesus has just raised a man from the dead and continued to garner more and more followers? I'm not sure that madhouse really covers it. Imagine the people that would have thronged around Jesus. Mere days before he was in Bethany and countless numbers of people either heard or saw him raise Lazarus and now all of those people, plus those that had already been with him have followed him to Jerusalem. It would have been an absolute crowd control nightmare.

Into the complete chaos of this space, John tells us that a group of Greeks approach the disciples to try and get an audience with Jesus, and you can tell that there's just something *odd* going on here, because it causes a lot of back and forth. First of all, they can't just straight up get to Jesus and so they approach Philip like he's some sort of bouncer for Jesus. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." And Philip seems to have *no idea* what to do with this so he goes and finds Andrew and is like, umm, there are some guys here who want to see Jesus. And for some reason neither of them seem comfortable going and telling Jesus by themselves about this, and you can imagine this group of Greeks lingering at the edge of the crowd watching it all play out and wondering what in the world the hold up is, or if they're going to be turned away because clearly their request has caused a bit of a stir. Philip and

Andrew *both* to go to Jesus and again seem to be like, uh, Jesus, see those guys over there? They want to talk to you.

Jesus doesn't seem to be put off or nearly as bothered by this whole situation as Philip and Andrew seem to be, instead he uses it as an opportunity to make sure that *everyone* that has gathered around him hears what he has to say, because this is the very last time that Jesus is going to teach in public and he needs to use that opportunity to its fullest. Once again, he reiterates what is about to happen, why it has to happen, and who his followers are called to be, servants who follow in his footsteps. A daunting message when those footsteps are moving towards the cross. But then he ups the ante a little bit and reveals even more deeply who he has come to be, who he was destined to be. In the resurrection, Jesus says he will draw *all people* to himself. Suddenly so many things click into place, why Jesus healed Jew and Gentile alike, why he doesn't balk at a group of Greeks wanting to talk to him, why after his arrival in Jerusalem the Pharisees declared, "Look, the world has gone after him." He hasn't just arrived in Jerusalem to change things for a handful of people or a specific group of people, but he's about to change the entire world, and the entire world is going to respond to it. Jesus says he is going to be about the work of driving the ruler of this world out so that the reign of God can truly take

hold, and in that reign, all people will be welcomed into the kingdom, all people will know God's love, all people will know that Christ came to die for the sake of each and every person's salvation.

Inherently, deep down, I think we know this, but where we get stuck is I'm not sure we really want to *accept* it. We hear that Jesus will draw all people to himself, and suddenly we're desiring half-filled stadiums of very specifically chosen occupants, not the fit to bursting masses of people who come from anywhere and everywhere. Because deep down, that's always been one of the most threatening things about Jesus, right? He sledgehammers his way through boundaries and the false dichotomies and hierarchies that humans have always been inclined to build up between us and says, come to me all who are weary. That's why the Pharisees are so baffled and threatened by the crowds that flock to him. That's why we try to put as many caveats on the gospel as we can. We, in some ways, want Jesus all to ourselves. Or at the very least we want to play bouncer to the gospel, like oh you want to talk to Jesus? Well, let's see if you fit the bill.

That right there is what makes the new covenant God makes in Jeremiah so world-altering. By telling the people that the covenant will be written into their very beings, that they will no longer have to teach each other who God is, God is taking away humanity's innate need to control

other's impressions and pathways to God. By saying that each person will just *know*, well then no one gets to dictate who God is to anyone anymore. Humanity's desire to put God in a box or define God by our own flawed definitions gets taken away in this new covenant. It just blows grace and faith wide open for literally all the world to get a piece of, and we honestly don't always know what to do with that.

We say *we want* the world to come to Jesus. We say *we want* people to come to church, to have faith, to experience God's love, but then are we just so absolutely determined to put up as many barriers and boundaries as we possibly can to keep that from happening. We say we want that, but I'm not entirely sure that we do...when we're honest with ourselves. Because we say we want everyone to experience God's love, and then we look at how we operate in the world around us...

In the last week alone, we have seen gross and despicable violence perpetrated on Asian Americans, not just in one place but in wave after wave of reactionary violence. Once again the LGBTQIA community has had the church tell them that they don't matter. The everyday practically normal modes of racism against African Americans continues on with most people just turning a blind eye to it. I mean we say we want God's love for all people, but look at the world we've created. Look at the world we continue

to perpetuate and encourage. We are not creating the kingdom of God where all know that they are loved and seen and accepted. This is not the kingdom of a Messiah who broke down barriers and welcomed in everyone, who made space for those who had been on the margins and brought them back into community.

So it begs the question...what do we want? Do we want a world where Jesus tells the bouncers to go away and let everyone in? Or do we want a world where we stand in the shoes of the Pharisees and shake our heads saying, “The world has gone after him?!” Do we want a world where the figurative stadium of God is fit to bursting with people from every corner, every creed, every lifestyle, every part of humanity or do we want a half-filled stadium where the people who are there had to check all the right boxes for admission? What do we want a crowded kingdom of God to look like? What kind of world do we want Jesus to have come to create? He says he’s come to get rid of the rulers of this world, the awful twists of evil that we’ve let rule it for so long. But are we ready to let him oust them from control? Are we ready to let him oust *us* out of control when it comes to God’s love? There were no barriers to the cross, no caveats on resurrection. So...are we ready? Are we ready to look at the crowds of our siblings around us and say welcome home, your place...is here. **AMEN!!!**