



UN-CROWDED

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Federal Way, WA
January 18th, 2009*

One of my favorite childhood memories is of inner tubing down the Satsop River near Schafer State Park. This was back in the days before water slides and artificial flotation devices. No smooth plastic courses with room temperature water. We're talking freezing cold river water. That was actually a blessing in disguise, because it made your feet numb enough that they couldn't feel the pain from all the sharp rocks you were stepping on. And this was back when you used real tire inner tubes, the black ones that gave you third degree skin burns they got so hot in the sun. The kind with valve stems poking you in unpleasant places. And these are my GOOD childhood memories...

It was a lot of fun. Inner tubing is really all about entrances and exits. You had to find a place to get into the stream that was slow enough to let you climb on your tube without the rapids yanking it out of your grasp, but you wanted a spot fast enough to actually take you downstream. And at the other end, you had to find a natural break in the current that would let you climb back on the shore without being swept away.

We're about to jump into Matthew today, and we're jumping into it midstream. I've been looking for a good entry point, because it's a pretty fast moving book and one thing leads right to the next. As I said last week, we're not doing a verse by verse study – we're calling out individual stories throughout Matthew – lives of people who bear the marks of an encounter with Christ. In what ways did Jesus' work -- his healing, his teaching, his love, his listening and his touch -- change them? How do their experiences connect with our own?

Matthew tells us early on what the shape of Jesus' ministry looked like:

Matthew 4:23

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Teaching, preaching and healing. It was a powerful three part strategy. Jesus instructed people about how to make sense of God's law. He gave them hope by announcing that God's kingdom was breaking into the world and things were going to be changing. And he met their felt needs – healing up all kinds of hurts they were suffering from. We'll see all three components at work in the coming weeks, but I want to begin with a healing.

Jesus had just finished the Sermon on the Mount. That is a huge block of teaching that we will tackle as its own series someday. For now, let's just say it was a watershed message, one that forever reframed how to think about living for God. It was unlike anything people had heard before. Listen to their reaction:

Matthew 7:28-8:4

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

In the movie *A Night at the Museum*, one of the curators at the museum is working on her master's degree, writing a thesis on Sacajawea, who was the Native American guide for Lewis & Clark. But she feels totally stuck in her research. She just can't wrap her mind around the topic.

During the course of the movie, all the exhibits come to life, including the statue of Sacajawea herself. Suddenly, the curator had something better than information – she had the real source who could give her a level of insight no textbook or expert could ever offer.

That's how the people felt about Jesus. They had heard all about God's law from the "experts", the teachers who explained them, but now they're hearing things straight from Jesus. He talks about God and the law in a totally different way. I love that the word authority has "author" right in it, because that's the kind of command Jesus had of his subject – he knew it from the inside out as an author rather than somebody who had just read the text a bunch of times.

So Jesus has just wrapped up this incredible time of teaching and preaching, and what does he follow it up with? His healing ministry. And it shows the same character. All the authority he displayed in his speaking now shows up in his command over diseases.

When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Matthew calls it a mountainside, but it was really more of a hillside. This photo is of the site that has traditionally been considered to be the place where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, and the location makes sense. It was a totally accessible place, but since it was on an incline, it would make a great natural amphitheater. A lot of people could gather and still be able to see and hear. It would have been like going to the Gorge for a concert, with everybody camped out on the lawn.

So when the event was over, you can picture this mass movement of people heading back down the hill toward Capernaum. You've got Jesus in the front and thousands of fans trailing behind. And then this one individual brings the entire parade to a halt. Hordes of

people behind Jesus, and this one man coming at him from the opposite direction all by himself.

Not only that, this is a man who is socially unacceptable. He's got leprosy. Lepers were not allowed anywhere near other people, because the risk of someone else catching it was too high. There was a major stigma surrounding the disease: anybody who had it was considered unclean and had to live separately from everyone else.

This particular man had a bad case of it. When Luke tells this same story, he mentions that the man was COVERED with leprosy. It was an advanced case. If I had that, I would want to curl up in a corner somewhere and hide. The last thing I would want to do would be to stroll out in public in front of a large crowd.

For me, that visual contrast between the crowd behind Jesus and this lone individual in front of him highlights what we mean by an encounter with Christ. There is a big difference between following a crowd and coming face to face with Christ. If we want to know what it is like to really connect with Jesus, we have to become "un-crowded". We have to step out as individuals to meet with him on our own.

The crowd is safe and anonymous. That's where you can look interested, but still blend in. Nobody knows your business. Nobody asks anything from you. You can be generally supportive of the ideas Jesus stands for without ever having to make any kind of commitment.

It's much riskier to get in front of Jesus. You feel exposed and vulnerable. You open yourself up to being noticed and possibly found out for who you really are. Jesus could easily have shunned the man, because he had no business exposing all these people to his condition.

So there's great risk in putting yourself in front of Christ. But that's also where the healing is. In the words of Sting: "Men go crazy in congregations. They only get better one by one."

To approach Jesus and make a connection means stepping out of the shadows and into the light. If we're wanting the healing touch of Christ, it will mean risking everything to get in front of him.

That sounds very daring, but what does it mean in real terms? There are some signs we can look for in our own lives to tell us if we're stuck in the crowd.

I'm stuck in the crowd if...

I talk about my relationship with God in terms of other people.

This isn't just for people new to church – this can happen to anyone. I'll give you a personal example. Back when I was at our old church and I was the worship leader, I went to a seminar once where one of the speakers made the comment, "We have to be

private worshippers if we're going to be public worshippers." That pulled me up short. I realized my individual, private times with God were lacking and I was relying on my up front role in the church to be my worship.

Maybe it takes a different shape for you. Maybe your thoughts about God are all intertwined with how you've been treated by Christians. Maybe you've been hurt or slighted by church people, and that feels like being hurt or slighted by God. After all, if Christians are supposed to be the body of Christ, you would expect them to stand in for Christ. But we can't let broken humanity have the last word. How we feel about the church can sometimes derail us from the real question, which is what's going on between me and God on a personal level. Forget how I'm doing with the larger group for a minute: how am I doing with God one on one?

We can fall into the same trap with our spouse or friends, relying on their spirituality or how they treat us to substitute for direct interaction with Jesus. It's easier to stay in a crowd. Another sign I may be stuck there is when

I'm living with pain I've never brought to God.

Are there things in your life you've been struggling with that you've never even thought to pray about? Sometimes it's easier to live with pain than with disappointment. Our faith can be fragile enough that we wouldn't dare risk asking God for something big, because it would crush us if he didn't answer. Or we think it's too trivial to bother him about. Or, if we're honest, it just doesn't occur to us to go to God with everything. We like to be self-reliant.

God certainly doesn't promise healing in every situation – physical, emotional or spiritual. Often he does answer in that way. But when we pray, several unexpected things happen for sure. First, Christ is invited into our situation. He doesn't force his way in. Second, someone else is in control who is trustworthy and true. And third, life-sized problems regain their proper perspective.

When we don't pray, the burdens become more and more overwhelming. It's only in taking them to Jesus that we find relief. There's no help in the crowd, because everyone there is struggling under the weight of their own problems.

A third way we can tell if we're stuck in the crowd is if we find ourselves thinking,

I don't want to be one of THOSE people.

You know – those people. The crazy-eyed religious freaks. The constantly needy basket cases. The overly emotional ones who make everything be about spiritual stuff. That's our fear of what it means to encounter Christ on a more personal level – that it will somehow move us into a category of weirdness that we don't want. So we try to get reasonably close without getting TOO close.

Listen, Jesus isn't asking you to change your personality. What the leper needed was not a lobotomy – he needed to be free from his disease so his real self could be restored. We need the same thing – to have Christ address the problems that our keeping us from being who we really were created to be. We actually become MORE like our true selves through Christ – not less. The thought that we're going to turn into fanatics is a lie our enemy the devil feeds us to keep us from doing what we need to do.

Those are just three examples of how we stay stuck in the crowd. I'm sure each of us has many more. It's not easy to step out on our own to deal directly with Jesus. The man with leprosy gives us such a bold model to follow.. If we break down what he did step by step, several things stand out.

When we meet him, he is bowing down in front of Jesus and calling him Lord. This is the first time in Matthew that anybody has used that title for Jesus, which is significant. This man is the first to acknowledge Christ's greatness and power in this way.

One of the most crucial questions to come to grips with as we encounter Jesus is, **Who are we dealing with?** Can we recognize his status, his glory and his power? We have many examples of people in the Bible coming face to face with God's glory. Isaiah saw the Lord in his temple and he fell face down to the ground. There was John on the island of Patmos, having his vision of Jesus, and the same thing happened to him. When three of the disciples saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain, appearing in his glory, they too hit the ground and bowed low. It was an involuntary reaction, because when you come that close to God's brilliance and power, there's no choice. You can't help but know you're lucky to even be alive in his presence.

But in this instance, Jesus was just walking down the road, looking ordinary. The leper chooses to recognize Jesus in his every day "street clothes." I think it's much harder sometimes to stay conscious of who Jesus is on a daily basis, when there is no big revelation of his glory – just his everyday street clothes. And I have to confess, I'm not very good at that. I treat Jesus far too casually most of the time. I drift mentally in my prayers. My mind wanders when I sing worship songs. I can read large chunks of Scripture without my brain engaged.

Just like the leper made a conscious, voluntary effort to humble himself and worship Jesus, we too need to do the work of worship. Getting in front of Jesus does nothing for us until we grasp who he is. That means stopping to reflect on what he has done and all he is capable of. It means giving our full attention to the fact that his is completely perfect. It means pausing to consider how much he loves us. The proper starting point in any connection with Christ is that recognition of who I am in relationship to him, acknowledging that he's my Lord and I'm a sinner in need of his grace.

Even then, the leper doesn't jump right into his plea. First he says, "Lord, if you are willing..." It's a short little line, but it does something important. This man is putting Christ's desires ahead of his own. I believe another important question in encountering Jesus is asking,

What does God want?

When Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer, he taught his disciples to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And when he prayed for himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, he told his Father, "Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done."

I've talked with many people who are confused when their prayers have gone unanswered. "When I needed him most, God wasn't there." That's often how it feels. But prayer is more than an act of throwing our needs at God and getting what we want. It's an attempt on our part to line up our wants with his. Sometimes they're the same, and sometimes they're very different.

I remember when Karin's uncle Rick was sick with a rare blood disease. He had contracted it many years before, and then it went into remission. Then it came back with a vengeance. He was a godly man, and Karin's aunt Barb and the rest of the family were all praying earnestly for his recovery. He was even able to undergo a bone marrow transplant that looked hopeful at first.

One night as I was praying for him, I opened my Bible to a random spot and I read this story about King Hezekiah. He was very ill and asking God to heal him. God spoke to the prophet Isaiah about him, and this is what happened.

2 Kings 20:4-6

Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD. 6 I will add fifteen years to your life.'

I read that and thought, "This is a sign about Uncle Rick! God had me read that for a reason." But I didn't want to raise any false hope, so I didn't tell Aunt Barb. But the next time we saw her, she mentioned that someone else had shared that very same passage with her, feeling the same way I had. So then I told her my experience, thinking she would be encouraged by that.

But she heard God saying something else through it. That story had been the very passage that had encouraged Uncle Rick when he first got sick, which had been exactly 15 years previously. And she realized that God was bringing it back to her mind, saying, "See? I did answer your prayer for healing. Now it's time for him to come home." And as hard as it was, she began to accept that her prayers needed to be for God's will to be done rather than her own. And he gave her strength and comfort to face the hard days that followed.

Our temptation here is to become overwhelmed with why questions. Why would that be what you want, God? I'm convinced that what we need to be asking ourselves is "Who?"

Who was so gracious to give Uncle Rick 15 more years of life? Whose ways are higher than our ways? Especially as Americans, we tend to feel that we are entitled to 85 years of health and success. Who is with us in every loss and sorrow? The Lord Jesus Christ. And we can trust him with all our whys.

Ephesians 5:10

Learn as you go along what pleases the Lord.

What does God want? Encountering Jesus isn't so much a chance to present our demands as it is an opportunity to discover what he wants. It's in this context that the leper finally says what's on his heart: "You can make me clean."

What do I need?

It's no secret that the man was coming to Jesus to get something from him. There is no shame in being needy and asking God for something. He doesn't have to be buttered up first – he invites our requests of all kinds.

But I do find it interesting that the leper framed his request in terms of being made clean. He didn't say "You can heal me." He didn't say, "You can ease my pain." He said, "You can make me clean."

That's a deeper issue. Being considered clean was a social issue – not just a physical one. Lots of people came to Jesus for physical healing, but this man wanted something more. He wanted his shame removed. He wanted to be restored to his community. He wanted an end to the isolation and loneliness of his condition. He wanted to be treated as a whole person again.

Now it was possible to be made clean in more than one way. Being cured was one. But priests could also declare someone clean who was covered from head to toe with leprosy. And since this man was pretty much in that condition, it wouldn't have been a stretch for Jesus to choose that route. Either way – the man doesn't tell Jesus how to do it. He just asks for what matters: being clean.

In other words, here's a man who came to Jesus with his deeper need – not a superficial plan for getting it. And it makes me ask myself: How in touch am I with what it is I really need? Am I mostly coming to Jesus with my own plan for how he should fix my problems, or am I getting to the core issue, bringing it to his attention and letting him decide how to best meet it?

From a human standpoint, the leper embodies such a wonderful way to approach an encounter with Jesus – remembering who we're dealing with, seeking what God wants and getting to the real need. But the real power in this encounter is found in what Christ does.

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.

I think those are some of the most beautiful words in the Bible. Here this man has just laid his heart on the line. He's just opened himself up to public rejection or rebuke for being so bold. "If you're willing, you can make me clean. If you want to, you can do this." The whole world waits for what Jesus will say. And without hesitation, he says, "Oh yes. That's what I want. Be clean."

Matthew gives us a pretty straight reading of Jesus' words and actions. Mark tells us just a bit more, which I think is worth noting, because it tells us how Jesus felt. Mark writes,

Mark 1:41

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

Christ wasn't irritated or angry. He was filled with compassion. Love and mercy moved him – not obligation or some sense of responsibility. He genuinely cared about the condition of this man.

And he did what nobody else could do. He touched this man who was considered untouchable. He reached into his world, and confirmed what his words were saying. "You're now clean."

This is where the life transformation happens – in that touch. In the blink of an eye, this man goes from being a leper to not being one. He is no longer someone who is defined by his circumstances – now he is defined by what God has done for him. He will forever be the man that Jesus healed up.

I don't want to be identified with my problems. I want to be identified by what Christ is doing with my problems. I want the story of how Jesus is taking me toward wholeness to be the best description of who I am.

When we come to Christ with a burden, there's no formula for making sure we always get a certain kind of answer. But there are still some things you CAN know beyond the shadow of a doubt. There is God's son, who looks at your plight and is filled with compassion. He is moved by what you're going through. It is always his will to see you made clean. And he is always about removing our shame and ending our isolation.

I am willing, says Jesus. Be clean. Be free. Be whole.

In his new-found condition, the man had an assignment from Jesus.

Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

The man is clean. The healing is complete. But there is still work to be done. Christ urges him to quietly go through the process required by the law for being officially declared clean.

That would have been a tough order to follow. I mean, come on – the leprosy's gone. Who cares about the formalities? And Jesus can't be serious about not telling anybody. I would want to tell EVERYBODY.

In fact, Mark tells us that's exactly what the man did.

Mark 1:45

Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news.

You'd think, well so what? Isn't it good for more people to hear about Jesus? But look what happened because of what the man did.

As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places.

Jesus knew what he was talking about when he asked the man to keep it quiet. It didn't seem to make sense ahead of time, but afterwards, the repercussions were significant.

This man's healing had the potential to speak to the priests about Jesus – his agenda and his power. That was what Jesus was hoping for anyway. But because the man didn't listen, instead of creating a window for ministry, it closed one. Jesus didn't have the same freedom to operate as he had before. There were new constraints on him that he hadn't had to deal with prior to that time.

It's kind of a sad little side note that in this man's enthusiasm, he didn't take Christ's instructions all that seriously. He got the help he wanted, but he quickly squandered an opportunity to make something more of the encounter he had had

Do my choices give Christ more freedom to work in the world, or less? When we fail to have integrity on the job, we shrink the influence we have for God in that place. When we lose our temper with our spouse or kids, we block our own effectiveness as bearers of God's grace. When I place too much value on my possessions, When I judge people based on their status, when I hold a grudge indefinitely, I stop being a conduit for God's activity.

On the other hand, the good news is that when God has been working on us and we respond with obedience, he can take what had been a source of grief in our lives and use it for his glory. He can use anything – ANYTHING – for his purposes when we give it over to him.

Chuck Colson served at the height of political power as a close advisor to Richard Nixon. He was the epitome of success, until Watergate. Then he suddenly found himself in jail

for his role in the scandal. But Colson became a Christian and afterwards started up a prison ministry, and he travels internationally to speak to inmates about Jesus.

One day before he got up to speak, he was thinking about all the accomplishments of his life. He had pretty much achieved the American dream. But then something hit him and he writes,

All at once I realized that it was not my success God had used to enable me to help those in this prison. All my achievements meant nothing in God's economy. No, the real legacy of my life was my biggest failure – that I was an exc-nvict. My greatest humiliation – being sent to prison – was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life; He chose the one experience in which I could not glory for His glory.

Confronted with this staggering truth, I discovered in those few moments in the prison chapel that my world was turned upside down. I understood with a jolt that I had been looking at life backward. But now I could see: only when I lost everything I thought made Chuck Colson a great guy had I found the true self God intended me to be and the true purpose in my life.

We come to Christ like the leper, full of insecurities and neediness. We encounter the power of Christ in a transforming way. And in the end, he not only meets our need – he takes that need and turns it into a vehicle for blessing other people and encountering them as well.

We all have deep needs, hidden fears, pockets of shame and isolation. And every one of those is an opportunity to connect with Christ more personally. As I look at myself this morning, what need can I turn into an encounter with Jesus? What do I need made clean?

How are my choices affecting Christ's work? Are my actions helping or hurting? Whatever Christ is doing in me can be used for his glory as I listen to what he's telling me to do.

Jesus is filled with compassion for you this morning. And he's willing to make you clean and whole once more.