

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from July 26, 2009

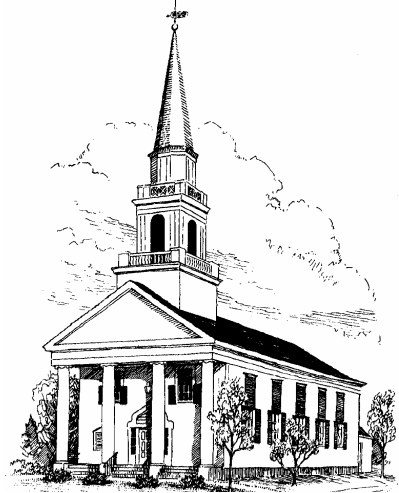
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Mob Mentality”

Scriptures:

2 Kings 4:42-44

John 6:1-21



It seemed like everyone was going, including my best friend. She and another friend had found a ride both ways. They were leaving Friday morning and would be back Sunday night. My mother wasn't too crazy about the idea; neither was my boyfriend. But I was 18 at the time, so I knew no one could stop me if I wanted to go. But, then again, there were other things going on at home, too, plenty of things to do over the weekend. What it really came down to was whether or not I had enough money to go. The outdoor concert tickets were \$6 for each day for 3 days, a total of \$18, and then there'd be food expense and chipping in for gas. Forty years ago, exactly 40 years ago next month, to be precise, that was a lot of money for this 18-year-old. My indecision ended up making my decision for me. I didn't go to Woodstock.

And as I watched the news that weekend in 1969 and heard the reports on the radio, I still couldn't decide whether my staying home had been the right thing to do. This was history in the making and my generation was making quite a statement. Yet, when my friends came home and I heard about what it was *really* like on the great deal of grass that had turned to muddy ground with no sanitation, no water, little food and their ride disappearing, I was glad I had stuck to the comforts of home.

The problem was the organizers of Woodstock had not prepared adequately for the crowd. No one had counted on 400,000 people showing up, and my recollection is that it was eventually declared a disaster area. Forty years later it is still considered the biggest moment in rock music history.

We're better at dealing with crowds now, when we're prepared for them. The best recent example is the Presidential inauguration in January—more than a million people gathered on the National Mall and nary an incident.

One effective way to study a bible passage is to hone in and concentrate on one of the characters; and an important character in our story this morning is “the crowd.” It's interesting to think about the phenomenon of crowds: how we gather in large numbers when it's important to us. Official crowd estimates seem to lend credibility to an event—the larger the crowd, the more real the phenomenon somehow. And with our current technology, we don't even have to

physically gather anymore. Phenomena are measured in “number of hits” to websites. Susan Boyle, the unlikely overnight singing sensation from a little town in Scotland thrown into the limelight through her performance on “Britain’s Got Talent” was viewed on line on YouTube 20 million times within 24 hours of her performance. The number eventually climbed to 300 million. (I think about 20 of those 300 million were mine.)

Crowds have been gathering for millennia and, upon reflection, it seems that we’re usually driven by some kind of hunger: hunger for action, hunger for justice, hunger for satisfying entertainment, be it music or athletics, hunger for inclusion, hunger for connection, hunger for celebration in the midst of a worrisome world, or a hunger to be heard.

The crowd gathering on the mountain on the other side of the Sea of Galilee whom we read about this morning was driven by hunger, too. We are told right off that the Sea of Galilee was also called the Sea of Tiberius to remind us that Rome was occupying the region. This crowd of 5,000 and many more like them were oppressed under Roman rule and hungered for their overthrow. Study bibles footnote the number 5,000 to remind the reader that 5,000 was the approximate size of a Roman military legion.

We read that this large crowd keeps following Jesus because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. They are hungry for liberation and they are hungry for healing. And this is the time of the Passover. The fact that the boy has barley loaves specifically is indicative of Passover time, the time when barley was harvested. *This* crowd, instead of traveling to the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover, has traveled here to Jesus, hungry to see him and hear him, hungry for change: change in their government, change in their circumstance, and hungry for the new king who will make it all happen.

And here they all come. Jesus looks up and sees the crowd coming toward him and asks Philip how are we going to feed all these people? Where are we to buy bread for them to eat? All the time knowing what he was going to do. Perhaps all the time also knowing how crowds were going to figure in to the rest of his ministry, right up until the moment of his death. Crowds now hungry for his word and his healing touch; later hungry for his crucifixion and death.

We chuckle about crowds of fickle sports fans: cheering and adoring during the hitting streak, then booing and showing no mercy during the eventual slump. Yet as we look closer, we see that, like other crowds, they’re hungry for heroics, for miraculous record-breaking performances, hungry to be on the side of the winners, and beyond that, even greedily hungry for a dynasty.

We see news videos from across the world—crowds foreign to us in the streets wildly waving firearms and effigies seemingly no matter who their latest leader is, hungry just for safety from their latest oppressor.

And the same news shows us crowds of refugees—be it from war or famine or natural disaster—crowds of refugees behind wire fences with hollow eyes, hungry for food and water and hungry for home.

And Jesus sees them coming. Jesus saw them flocking to the mountain 2000 years ago, and Jesus sees them today. Jesus saw them streaming to Woodstock, saw them emptying out on the streets of Tehran, saw them fleeing the Sudan. Jesus saw us, all of us from the beginning of human history to its end, with all of our intense hungers – not just for basic bread for our bodily hunger, but all of our yearnings, longings, clamorings, frustrations, anger, disease. Jesus saw them coming toward him that day on the mountain and Jesus knew what he was going to do.

Make the people sit down. Make the people sit down. And there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down. And he took the loaves and he gave thanks and he gave them out, and the fish, too, as much as they wanted, and they ate until they were satisfied, and there were even twelve baskets of leftovers that he had them gather so none would be lost. So none of us would be lost.

Sit down on the grass and I will feed you. By his miracle, Jesus so much as says: This is bigger than who's in earthly power right now, bigger than rock stars and sports legends and YouTube celebrities. This is bigger than kings, bigger than presidents. I am giving you a sign now, a taste of the real kingdom of God, the kingdom to come, the kingdom you can choose right now despite your earthly circumstances. I am showing you the miraculous abundance available to you despite the limitations you see with your eyes. Sit down on the grass and I will feed you.

We know crowds of paparazzi and adoring fans are infamous for their hounding of celebrities, contributing in no small way to their subsequent retreat from the limelight, sometimes retreating as far as to rehabilitation centers, suffering from exhaustion and/or a host of abuses. We have learned that soon after Susan Boyle's instant rise to fame, she tucked herself away in a clinic, exhausted from clinging crowds and worldwide attention. Our scripture tells us: When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

And we wonder about his times of withdrawal. Was he exhausted after first feeding a crowd of 5000 and then realizing they really hadn't understood what he was revealing to them? We read he stayed there beyond dark. The disciples leave ahead of him, perhaps not quite understanding either. And it can get awfully stormy out there on the water without him. So Jesus reveals another sign, walking towards them on the water, this time positively identifying himself just as YHWH does in the Hebrew Scripture: It is I. I am. And they are safe once again.

For her birthday two weeks ago my daughter was treated to the Billy Joel-Elton John concert at Nationals Stadium in Washington, DC. She loved it. Afterwards, she told me of the mounting excitement on the very crowded Metro ride to the concert and the soaring spirit in the stadium as 40,000 fans of all ages gathered to hear these favorite artists. She told me of the atmosphere of unity among the assembled as they rose to their feet and sang along together all the familiar lyrics. And she mused aloud to me: Really, where else can you have so many people happily gathered like that with one thing in common and one purpose?

So I gently reminded her about this crowd, the one who gathers here and in places like it all over the world every Sunday morning with one thing in common and one purpose: to thank God for Jesus and his infinite abundant love, to sit down together in the soft grass he provides,

to listen to his word and to be fed by him. To bring here all the hungers we attempt to feed with the things of this world and to realize that our true hunger is our hunger for him. It is I. Sit down. Amen.