

I recently returned from a educational trip to East Asia, sponsored by my seminary. I traveled with a small group of fellow students and professors for 17 days through South Korea and China. We spent our time visiting cultural and religious sites. The trip was intended to be cross-culturally educational, a chance to get a feel for the spiritual climate of both countries. Since this was my first opportunity to travel outside the United States, I assumed that the experience would be eye-opening and educational, and I was certainly not disappointed. I tried a lot of interesting foods, learned a ton about interacting with other cultures, and picked up some stories about the missionary activity of the Western church. Our group was able to visit a number of seminaries and churches in both Korea and China, and I was fascinated to discover the ways that my education and religious practices are similar to theirs, and the ways that they differ.

Most interesting to me, though, were the people. As we explored religious and cultural sites in both countries, we were regularly surrounded by enormous crowds. We spent most of our time in Korea in the capital, Seoul. It has the second highest population density of any city in the world. China, of course, is the most populated country on earth, and we toured three of its largest cities. We saw a lot of people. Now I've always been kind of a small town guy. Richmond, Virginia, where I currently live, is probably the biggest city I ever want to call home. I prefer the more laid back feel of a small town like Black Mountain. In Asia the constant press of the crowds, whether in line to visit a temple or simply walking down the street, was sometimes a bit overwhelming.

Crowds are an interesting phenomenon. Scientific theories such as herd mentality and crowd psychology tell us that it takes very few influencers to change the entire mood of a group of people, and the actions of the crowd around us can make us do things we wouldn't normally consider. A friend of mine in seminary once joined the mob rushing the field after his favorite college football team won an upset. When he jumped 12 feet from the stands down to the turf, he remembered he was no longer in his 20s and shattered his left ankle. There is a good reason the word *crowd* is a singular noun. We often think of the spectators at a sporting event or a

large concert as though they are one body, with one mind and attitude. Much like a school of fish or a flock of birds, they often seem to react in unison.

The crowds of people that Jesus saw as he walked from town to town were certainly one body: they were all terribly oppressed and downtrodden. Jesus recognized that they were helpless; they couldn't catch a break. They needed some good news to lift their spirits. Jesus saw this, and felt great compassion for them. His heart was broken. He wanted to comfort them, but he recognized the enormity of the task. His great compassion for the masses of people made him realize that need can often be never-ending.

The people were crying out for relief from their oppression. They needed some good news for a change. Jesus had that good news, he *was* that good news. Jesus knew the needs of the crowds, and he also saw that the crowds were enormous. But he realized he might not be able to do it all on his own. He recognized that he could use some help. Thankfully, Jesus had a ready supply of volunteers to recruit, and he was a good delegator. He commissioned and authorized twelve of his disciples to go out among the crowds, to heal bodies and cleanse hearts, and to proclaim the incredible good news that God's kingdom had come near to them. Jesus inspired those around him to do the work of God, *and* he gave them the tools necessary to do their work effectively.

Now, I hadn't intended to talk about Berry French in my sermon about Jesus, but it turns out he's a pretty good illustration for this point. You see, one of Berry's many ministry skills, one I hope to emulate, is his ability to cultivate ministry leadership in those around him. He is very skilled at finding a niche for everyone, and making sure they get plugged in. For example, and this might sound familiar to several other current and former youth leaders, but my name was barely on the church membership roll before I was ushered in to meet the students. There's probably plenty more stories like that here today. But see I think that is exactly what Jesus was doing here: filling a need *and* expanding God's kingdom, while encouraging and facilitating the ministries of others.

When the author of Matthew lists the twelve men that Jesus sent out to the crowds, he calls them apostles. The word apostle literally means "one who is sent out." This is the only time that term is used in the entire book of Matthew. A lot of times we think of apostles as

Jesus' special inner circle, a small, elite group that had an extra *something* we can no longer get today. But Matthew portrays these twelve as only the beginning of something: the first in a line started by Jesus that continues all the way down to us. Right here. Today. We are recipients of that same good news—the news that the grace of God has delivered us from fear and oppression and sin. Because of this, God desires that we too will view the crowds with the compassion of Jesus, and will reach out to them with his same healing touch and transformative message.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is shown responding compassionately to the needy and to the oppressed. We see him respond even though he is busy, reach out when is tired, heal when he is overwhelmed. We see his compassionate gaze fall even on members of the desperate crowds that his inner circle encouraged him to ignore. But he also worked to inspire this same loving attitude in those around him. Over and over we read of Jesus calling his followers to be a servant to all¹; to give to those who cannot repay²; to sell your possessions and give to the poor³; to love your neighbor just as you love yourself⁴. Jesus lead by example. He set out the path of love and compassion and even now calls those who would follow him to become part of something bigger than themselves. He calls them to reach out to the least and the lost.

Sisters and brothers, we are the ones who are called. We are called to reach out in compassion to others. Jesus asks us to look through his eyes at those around us, those perhaps less fortunate than us, to see them as he sees them. To notice their needs, their lost-ness, and to extend a loving hand toward them. Walk beside them, and help carry their burden.

That is something this church family does well, and a big reason why I am so proud to call myself a member at Black Mountain Pres. We minister to those around us. BMPC plays an important role in the community outreach of this valley. We have a strong presence in the Swannanoa Valley Christian Ministry, Room in the Inn, Habitat for Humanity, and numerous other ministries. We also support mission coworkers and church partnerships in places around

¹ Mark 10:44

² Luke 14:12-14

³ Matt 19:21

⁴ Matt 22:39

the world. So many of our members are willing to volunteer their time and energy to serve others. The church offers numerous opportunities for you to make yourself part of something bigger, and to reach out to your neighbor in love and compassion just like Jesus did.

It is so beautiful to realize what our church body can do, and to see ourselves as an integral part of it. But I want us to explore the idea that God is calling each one of us to do all that we can, as individuals. God desires that you and I discover what we can do to make a difference for our neighbors. It starts with simple steps. It doesn't take much. Help out the single parent working long hours, struggling to make ends meet and still get to their child's soccer games. Visit the elderly woman down the street who lives alone and rarely has a guest. Befriend the teenager at the park who is convinced that no one understands or really cares about him. Smile at the young mom in the grocery store line who needs just a moment to breathe, and maybe a little grownup conversation. Stand up for members of marginalized communities when they are ostracized or persecuted. Be an advocate for the immigrant who is harassed and oppressed, rejected before she is even given a chance. Shine the light of Christ's hope onto the hurting soul stuck in the darkness of addiction. See these neighbors, and reach out to them with Christ's compassion.

Jesus commissioned the twelve apostles to be an extension of his ministry. He sent them to cure the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse the leper, and to cast out demons. We are also an extension of Christ's ministry. It's true that we can't do the miraculous things the apostles did. Jesus enabled those men to perform miracles, yes, but they weren't flashy ones designed to draw crowds. Their acts were personal, focused on demonstrating God's concern for God's hurting people.⁵ Jesus empowered the apostles to make a difference in the lives of individuals.

We have that power, too. We have the ability to bring about change in the lives of our neighbors both near and far. Our lives can be a beacon of the good news that Jesus came to bring: God's grace and peace that overcomes all obstacles. Even a simple smile or word of encouragement can convey the love of Christ, and can make a world of difference to someone in need. The crowds are all around us. How will you respond? Amen

⁵ This thought comes from Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation, p. 111