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"The One in the Midst of Many"  
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West Side Christian Church

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The headline on CNN.com yesterday afternoon was that Tiger Woods had missed the cut at the British Open, which is only the second time he has missed the cut in a major championship in his career. That was the headline. That is how much the golf career of Tiger Woods is followed!

If you have ever been a spectator at a golf tournament in which Tiger Woods played, you get a glimpse of just how much he is followed by the mobs of people that literally follow him during a given round. Even if you have only watched him on television, the scene is so remarkable, no matter how many times you see it, that the commentators repeatedly point out how unbelievable it is to watch the droves of people who follow Tiger on a golf course.

I saw Tiger play live once. When I lived in Texas, a friend of mine gave me a ticket to the Byron Nelson Golf Tournament played at Las Colinas Golf Club in Dallas. At this time, Tiger was relatively new on tour, but he had been making a buzz in the golf world for a while.

The golf tournaments I had attended in the past had been relatively subdued events. The peace and quiet of both the golf course and the game usually made attending a tournament relaxing. However, when I stepped onto the golf course at Las Colinas, it was like a mad house. People were rushing around, coming and going, everyone asking about what hole Tiger was on and how he was playing.

Overhearing one group of folks talking about Tiger around the 18<sup>th</sup> green, I politely asked them what hole he was currently playing. An individual from the group turned, looked at me and said, "He is on hole thirteen, but you may as well wait here if you want to see him." I thought to myself, "I need to jump five holes ahead in order to get one glimpse of Tiger Woods? That can't be true."

I made the trek out to the fifteenth hole, thinking that getting two holes ahead would be sufficient. However, I was met with huge crowds desperate to get a glimpse of Tiger, people pushing and shoving, security like I had never seen before. I finally decided to get smart and just walk ahead to the eighteenth as I had originally been advised. As a result, I did see Tiger Woods, from a distance, hit his approach shot into the eighteenth green during that round. One shot...that's I what I got to see of Tiger Woods in person.

The whole experience came to mind as I read through the story from Mark this week. The disciples and Jesus had planned for a peaceful, relaxing day of rest

and respite, but the crowds are not having it. The text reads that when the people heard Jesus was nearby, “they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.”

Mark describes the crowds in such a way that they seem frazzled and disoriented. When they get across to the other side of the lake, the text reads that “people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region bringing him the sick on mats....and people begged him that they might even touch the fringe of his cloak.” Just like the mobs that follow Tiger Woods around a golf course, the people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean World figured they might only have one shot to see Jesus in action. So these crowds acted, as Mark says, “like sheep without a shepherd.”

It is not surprising that Mark would describe the crowds in this sort of chaotic way. It seems that throughout the gospel of Mark, not only the crowds following Jesus, but even Jesus and his disciples are running from one place to the next, moving from healing, immediately to preaching, immediately to teaching, immediately to a miracle.

And I do mean “immediately.” While Mark does not use that word in this particular reading, he uses the word “immediately” 43 different times in his gospel. Mark’s book is also the shortest of the four gospels, which makes it even more of a hurried, chaotic story about Jesus and his followers.

What you may not know is that today is our four-year anniversary together as a congregation and pastor. It was during this week in July 2005 that we begin our ministry together. I think that if we were to relate our journey together to any of the gospels, it would most appropriately relate to the gospel of Mark....maybe even to this particular story.

We, as West Siders, have been coming and going, moving through our visioning plan together, hurrying from one action plan to the next, immediately going from ministry, to ministry, to ministry....perhaps even trying to rush ahead of Jesus at times, rather than allow things to happen in God’s time.

Mark writes of the apostles, “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” How much time have we taken to stop and eat together? And eating here is more symbolic than it is literal.

Eating together was about rest and reflection. Eating was done in order that appropriate time would be taken to nurture relationships and community. Eating was not only about the sustenance gained from the food itself, but also about the spiritual nourishment that was gained from sharing a meal with one another. Eating was about taking time to stop and remember together the “One” who makes possible life and ministry together, in the midst of the “many” demands placed on them.

I was reminded of this on Wednesday night of this past week. For the first time in a while, I felt like we came together as a congregation simply to be in fellowship and worship with one another. The food was great. We laughed and joked with one another. Becky led us in singing some old hymns and learning some new ones. It was a renewing, nurturing experience that was about nothing other than being with one another and with God.

I worry that in our time together, there has been so much coming and going that we, at times, have not had the leisure to eat. This is our nature in western culture, isn't it? Too busy for a real lunch, young professionals munch on vending-machine food while working at their desks. Teens grab a bagel for breakfast on the way out the door to school. Parents and children drive through a succession of fast-food restaurants between after-school lessons and sports practices. Commuters sip double lattes on the early morning drive, gnaw on baby carrots between meetings, and pick up takeout on the way home. Toddlers graze on cereal pieces and other portable finger foods so that meal schedules need not control the timing of family shopping trips.<sup>1</sup>

We are people besieged by the many: by activities and responsibilities that reshape even basic functions. Our busyness prevents us from gathering for family meals, and we may even forget that we enjoy stopping to eat together, especially when we find pleasure and fulfillment in many of the other activities that make up our day.<sup>2</sup>

The church is no exception to this rule. Sometimes we are so adamant about doing all the ministries that we feel called to, we are so entrenched in the many changes taking place, we get so caught up in the multitude of needs in the church, community, and world, that we forget about the "One" who is making our ministry possible in the first place—who is calling us to, above all other things, be in relationship and community with God and with one another. In the midst of the many, we act as if we are "sheep without a shepherd."

After thinking about those crowds that hastily follow after Jesus, who rush ahead frantically to get their needs met by him, I realize that in some ways congregations are not like these desperate crowds.

Because our lives run over with "the many," (our involvement in many organizations, our ownership of many things, our sharing in many activities) we are not rushing ahead to get to church too early for any activity. We do not feel compelled overtly to push through crowds for morning communion. Church is only "one" of the many activities that fill our modern lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Yust, Karen Marie. "Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word*. Proper 11 (Sunday Between July 17 and July 23 Inclusive). Mark 6:30-34, 53-56. Pg. 260.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

However, this does not mean that we are not hungry, or that desperation is not present. This does not mean that we are nothing like those crowds.

In fact, it is in the “many,” it is in the variety, it is in the multitude that our desperation is revealed. In our preoccupation with many things, we know that our resources are few. Actually, it is the many that end up depleting us: our time, our energy, our money, our spirits in such a way that we actually look a lot like those desperate crowds portrayed in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>3</sup>

We spread ourselves so thin, squeeze every ounce of ourselves out into the many things that we do, that we become desperately in need of the “One” who looks upon the crowds with compassion, even when he himself is worn down and exhausted from the chaos of ministry.

I read about an individual this week, a person of considerable power and influence, who hikes in the mountains for a week every year. While he is gone, he asks his wife to save all the newspapers delivered during the week. After his return he reads every one just to remind himself that it all happened without him.

Those who are empowered by the gospel and act under the influence of Christ's spirit need that reminder too. The apostles learned two lessons in our reading this morning: that the power of God can be at work through them, and that God is also at work without them. When the apostles' compassion was spent and their ability to respond to need exhausted because of the many demands in their lives, people were healed and given compassion anyway, by the “One” who is always at work in the world, regardless of what we do.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps we might learn something of our time together in these first four years. In the coming months, we should spend more time taking the leisure to eat together: to recoup, to rest, to reflect on the “One” who makes possible the many. Let's worship, let's fellowship, let's be in prayer with one another—let's make sure we take time to put aside the many and focus on the “One.”

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Johns, Cheryl Bridges. “Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word*. Pg. 263.

<sup>4</sup> Copenhaver, Martin. “Watching From the Boat.” *The Christian Century*. June 29, 1994.