

Luke 6:17-19

Seventh Sunday Morning After The Epiphany, February 22, 2004

One of my favorite Southern novelists is Flannery O'Connor. The Milledgeville native, who died at age 39 in 1964, was once asked why, in her short-story fiction, she created such freakish characters. She responded, "To the almost blind, you must draw very large, and to the almost deaf, you must shout loudly."¹ If you've read her stuff, you'll know, like I, that O'Connor does draw large and shouts loudly.

I think that is what Jesus did. He dealt with many people who were physically challenged – the blind, the deaf, and others. He also dealt with a lot of folk who were spiritually challenged – those blind and deaf to the things of God. So He drew large pictures of salvation through His many miracles and teachings and He shouted loudly through the same so all could see and hear.

One such large drawing and loud shouting was prayer. Luke 6:12 speaks of Jesus spending the entire night in prayer. I wish I could say that I've done that. Jesus did this often, taking that discipline seriously. He found that His Father in heaven was always within reach and especially in prayer. So Jesus touched Him often. The Father, also, often touched Jesus. Jesus saw and heard the Father's desire. He was neither blind nor deaf, so the drawing didn't have to be large and the shouting didn't have to be loud. This particular prayer vigil had to do with selecting twelve of His disciples to be His chief apostles. Listen as Luke articulates the selection of these men in 6:13-16.

"And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor."

As you read the story from this point forward in Luke's Gospel, you'll discover Jesus drawing some rather large imagines and shouting rather loudly to get these guys, in addition to everyone else, to see and hear. He wanted them to understand that through each of them, others would realize that He was within reach and could be touched. And He demonstrated that in the very next scene here in Luke.

Standing on a level place, with both believers and non-believers alike, there were folks who were Jewish, "*people from all Judea, and Jerusalem*"(v. 17b), and folks who were Gentiles from "*the coast of Tyre and Sidon*" (v. 17b). Jesus spoke because all these folks had come to hear Him and He also acted because they came to see. He spoke loudly through His teachings and He produced large drawings through His healings. He obviously did this because He was tenderly, yet forcefully, compassionate. I also believe a part of the reason He drew very large and shouted very loudly was to get His disciples, especially The Twelve He had just chosen, to see and hear that whenever God is within reach, you need to touch Him, because the power that flows from Him always brings better sight and better hearing – spiritual sight and spiritual hearing, that is.

Often we tend to forget that Jesus is always within reach. So I affirm that right now. Jesus is within reach and because He is, we are to touch Him. And so you'll know, right now, right this very moment in your history and mine, we are channels through which others may touch Him.

I do believe that over this weekend, as a result of the church's efforts on Compassion Day yesterday, that Jesus was brought within reach of people all across Carrollton. I do believe many touched Him. I want us to consider how various groups of brothers and sisters from Tabernacle Baptist Church came off the mountain of prayer and, like Jesus and on behalf of Jesus, allowed Him to be within reach and permitted a touching of Him yesterday. Think about these acts of ministry from yesterday.

- Supplies were provided for the Emergency Pantry at the Carroll County Parenting Program
- Books were distributed at the County Jail and more will be distributed this afternoon
- Visits were made to the Homebound

- Some elderly were assisted with medication costs and groceries
 - The Children's Choirs and Men's Ensemble sang at some assisted living facilities
 - There were games and an ice-cream social at Alice's House
 - Construction work was done at God's Farm
 - Baskets of personal care items were prepared for nursing homes
 - Donations of paper goods were made to the needy
 - Baby blankets were made for infants at Tanner Medical Center
 - Missions Friends, Girls in Action, and Royal Ambassadors, provided the ingredients for the Churchwide Soup and Cornbread Luncheon to immediately follow our worship today to raise donations for the Soul Kitchen to purchase appliances
 - The Preschool through 6th Grade Bible Study classes provided toilet paper for New Hope Boys' Home
 - Young singles dispensed free lemonade and cookies at Walmart
- Josh Dixon, one of our young singles, is going to share about his experience at Walmart.

Josh: There were about 10 from our class along with some of our children who handed out cookies and lemonade at Walmart. It gave us a good feeling and we sensed that people received our gifts with gratitude. It's amazing what God can do through simple little things like that. I hope we can do something like this again.

Thanks, Josh.

- Free lemonade and cookies were also dispensed at the Washbowl by the Girls in Action and the Royal Ambassadors
- Baskets were given to Hospice
- The Student Ministry washed cars to raise donations for the Soup Kitchen

In the midst of all this activity yesterday, power flowed from Jesus through His disciples called Tabernacle Baptist Church. Hopefully a lot of people, believing people and non-believing people, were able to touch Him because He was within reach. Hopefully those same people and many others will still be able to touch Him through Tabernacle Baptist Church because through this community of faith He is within reach. Or He is supposed to be. When we give ourselves to Him in prayer and act as a result of our praying, He will select the right moments for us to be in places where He is within reach and where He can be touched through us and by us.

Late this past Tuesday afternoon I was at Tanner making the hospital rounds. As I was making my way out, a young man who sits at the information desk occasionally, noticed my ID badge, which indicates that I'm a Volunteer Chaplain for Tanner. He said there was family needing a pastor and pointed them out to me. I went to this lady and identified myself. She said her husband had had a heart attack on Sunday and had been on life-support ever since with no hope being offered for a recovery. She said, "We're waiting for him to die." She began to sob. Then she asked if I would help bring closure for them. I told her I would. As we made our way back to the ICU, I asked some questions about her family. They don't live in Carroll County, but in one of the adjoining counties. They're from Oklahoma and haven't been here very long. Both she and her husband were Christians. Both were Baptists. Neither were in church, though. I entered the ICU room with her, where two of her sisters and a brother-in-law were waiting. There lay her husband. Obviously the machine was keeping him alive. I introduced myself to the gentleman and read scripture to him and then told him it was OK to die. I assured him that his faith in Christ would literally place him in the presence of Christ where he would dwell for eternity. I assured him that his family would be fine. I then prayed for him and his release from this life into the next life and for his family. After my prayer, I couldn't reach him to give my blessing through a kiss on the forehead, which is my practice, so I kissed my fingers and touched his forehead. I suppose this was sort of a "Baptist Last Rites" for one dying. He died about an hour later.

Yesterday, I called his widow. She said that she had experienced a peace through all of this. She couldn't explain it other than to say, "I figure it is just the Lord's presence that's bringing me this peace. I know that I'll have some difficult days, but right now, I'm at peace. I'm OK. I have strength."

Maybe a family, whom I didn't know and who didn't know me, was touched last Tuesday. Maybe there was a power flowing from me that brought some comfort to a hurting family who needed to begin the process of healing and find strength for a peaceful journey. I would never dare place myself on the same level with Jesus, God forbid; but I do have to remind myself constantly, as should you, that I am one of His representatives. I am one of His ambassadors. I am one of His priests. I am one of His disciples. I am one of His apostles. I am one of many who go out daily, having come down from the mountain of prayer onto the level ground with multitudes of people, some believers and some not, to be a vehicle of grace, whereby people can experience His power, flowing out through me, that brings healing – a healing empowerment to face death and even life, which is often more difficult than death. Jesus is within reach through people like you and me and when people, like that fellow, who died on Tuesday, can't touch him, we need to touch them with Jesus through an act of kindness and generosity and even simple gestures like a kiss on the forehead.

And so you'll know, He's within your reach right now. Whatever is going on in your life, He is within your reach and power is flowing from Him to you. Right now, why not touch Him? Just as you are, go ahead and touch Him. You can see, can't you? You can hear, can't you? Surely I don't need to be like Flannery O'Connor and draw large and shout loudly, do I? If by chance, however, I do, let me know before you leave today, because I don't mind drawing real large and shouting real loudly if it will bring Jesus within your reach. I want you to be able to touch Him. More than anything, I want Him to touch you. How about it?

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989.

¹ Mark A. Buchanan, "Rabbit Trails to God" Christianity Today July 2003, p. 44 as quoted in Homiletics 16 (January-February 2004) 1, p. 34.