

“Making Room in the Crowd”

Luke 8:40-48

In 2005, a man named Frank Warren came up with a concept for a group art project. He invited 3,000 strangers in Washington, DC to anonymously submit a homemade postcard that revealed a secret about themselves. He instructed them that the secret could be about anything as long as it was true and it had never been shared with anyone before—a regret, fear, betrayal, desire, confession, childhood humiliation—anything, as long as it was true and had never been shared.

As Warren passed out the instructions to strangers on the streets of DC, he didn't know how the project would go or if anyone would even respond. But he gave out his personal mailing address and set a goal to receive 360 postcards for his project. Since 2005, Warren has now received over 500,000 postcards, each revealing a secret from its anonymous sender. Since 2005, he has been sharing 10 new postcards each week on his website and as of this week has had over 700 million visitors, many of them teenagers, reading the secrets of complete strangers.

The post cards say things like, “I wish I could go to school with no make-up and feel beautiful.” “I make everyone believe that I like to be different, but really I just don't know how to fit in.” And others, not as serious, like “I self-medicate with chicken nuggets.”

One of the visitors of the website had this to say: “PostSecret has taught me a lot. That I'm not alone. I read these secrets and so many people share the same pain that I faced alone day in and day out. It's taught me to be open with my pain and that it's ok to not live with it alone...”

Postsecret.com has been made popular largely, but not exclusively by teenagers who are searching for some sense of community in which openness is the norm and everyone knows that they are not alone. Don't we all long for that type of community? Don't we all ache to know that we belong?

In the story we read this morning, we met a woman who might have written an anonymous postcard if she was given the chance. For twelve years she has been afflicted with an embarrassing disease that has caused continual bleeding. In her time, such a disease would earn her the label “unclean,” which lumped her together with anyone else who suffered from leprosy, skin diseases, or any other physical affliction that the people didn’t understand. If you were unclean, you were cast out to the fringes of society as an undesirable. It was so much easier to push those afflicted to the side than to take on the hard and inconvenient task of embracing them.

With the woman’s disease, if anyone touched her, they too would become unclean and had to immediately wash their clothes, take a bath, then were considered unclean themselves until night. If you touched anything she sat on or laid on, you became unclean and must wash.

So, to avoid the inconvenience of mistakenly touching something unclean and becoming unclean themselves, the “clean” would banish these undesirables to the outskirts of town where they would have little social interaction.

The woman, we read, would have been subject to this type of treatment for 12 years, and no doubt wanted relief. 12 years! As doctor after doctor delivered bad news, I can’t imagine she had much hope left. She had spent all the money she had in desperation that the next doctor might be able to find a cure for her disease and put an end to the suffering, but her condition doesn’t budge.

She is physically exhausted, mentally and emotionally drained, forced to be a loner, and probably on the verge of just throwing her hands in the air and giving up. On the outside she does everything she can to look like everyone else. But inside she’s hurting and lonely. Wasn’t there anyone in her community that would notice her and choose not to turn the other way? How she must have longed for a community where openness was the norm and no one was left to feel alone.

Three years ago Sydney participated in our High School Mission Trip to the exotic destination of Greene County, TN. If you ever get a chance to go there, you definitely should—it's a beautiful place! On the last day of our week of service, we went to the Greene Valley Developmental Center. We really had no idea what we would be doing there, but we went to offer our hands to help in whatever way they needed us. Maybe they needed some help organizing supplies in the warehouse. Maybe they'd have us work with the grounds crew to trim bushes. After taking a tour of the facility, we were invited into the wing that housed the lowest functioning residents. We were told by the staff that these residents were the least likely to receive visitors and for many of them, their only human interaction came from the staff. The residents couldn't speak and couldn't feed themselves, but they were so happy to have visitors. And I wish we could have taken a video of their bodies coming to life when Sydney got out her mellophone and played a simple tune. The music brought joy to their eyes, and those that could tapped their toes and clapped their hands. How powerful it is—and Sydney gets it—to acknowledge the worth of another human being and share your gifts with them.

Some days the woman in our story musters enough courage to walk through town, face fully covered and head down, of course. On this particular day, there is excitement in the air and she notices a larger crowd than normal. As she listens to the buzz, she realizes that in the front of the mass of people is Jesus. So, she decides to walk behind the crowd that is making its way through the city streets, trying to get a glimpse of the man everyone is here to see.

As she walks, she hears those in the back of the crowd sharing stories about what Jesus had done in the next town over. As she listens to their stories, she thinks, "If Jesus did what they say he did, I wonder if he could heal me too?"

She continues walking and hears story after story, each one more miraculous than the other. She thinks to herself, "I need to talk to this man," and she begins her journey through the crowd. But making her way to Jesus isn't as easy as she thought it would be. Deep inside the crowd she realizes that in everyone's push to get closer to Jesus, no one is willing to give up any ground. She sees religious leaders working together to hold the townspeople away, and disciples arguing about who gets to walk on Jesus' right and left. She overhears people arguing over issues of the Sabbath and sacrifices, none of which she fully understands.

In the chaos of the crowd, she nearly decides she's in the wrong place and that maybe she needs to just go back to her lonely life on the outskirts of town. She nearly decides that her issues aren't worthy of Jesus' attention.

But just as the woman might have turned away, she hears a man ask Jesus to come lay hands on his dying daughter. When Jesus so willingly agrees, the woman's faith is restored and she thinks, "I'll never be able to get close enough to talk to Jesus, but if I could only reach out enough to touch his clothes, that will be enough to heal me."

I imagine she worked her way through the pushing crowd and positioned herself to where, if she timed it just right, she could lunge forward and graze the edge of his robe. She softly counted to 3, then stretched her arm as far as it would reach and leaned in to touch him.

As her fingertips softly swiped the fabric, she felt her body mending and for the first time in 12 years felt the freedom that she had so longed for. As she stood overwhelmed, she hardly noticed the crowd had stopped around her.

Jesus had stopped walking. The whole crowd, hoping that he was going to break into a spontaneous sermon there on the road, stopped and quieted each other down. Jesus asks, "Who touched my clothes?"

The disciples are a little confused by the question as they look at the hundreds of people trying to get as close to Jesus as they possibly can. One of them, Peter, speaks up to say what they all must have been thinking, “In a crowd like this, Jesus, who didn’t touch your clothes?”

Jesus scans the crowd, then the woman steps forward and falls at his feet. She starts at the beginning and describes the pain and loneliness of the past 12 years all because of the disease that has robbed her of her dignity and life. I imagine Jesus helps her to her feet, embraces her in a hug, then looks directly into her tearful eyes and says, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

Wasn’t there anyone in the crowd that day who noticed the woman’s need to come close to Jesus? Was there no one who recognized the woman’s situation so they could offer to empower her voice? Or was it that they noticed her, but their efforts to hold their own positions left little time for concerning themselves with her needs.

I know about this crowd that gathers around Jesus because I’ve been a part of the crowd for a long time. I’m not proud to say that I’ve shoved and pushed and clawed my way through the crowd, all in the name of positioning myself closer to Jesus, but at what cost? I’m quick to agree that all are invited, but less sure that all have felt welcome. I’m quick to agree that all God’s children have value, but less sure that all are reminded of their worth. I’m quick to agree that this crowd surrounding Jesus should be the most loving place on earth, and then I’m reminded of how unloving I can be.

Oh, how I need to hear the voices in the crowd reminding me to make room. I need the phone calls like the one I got from Sydney in early January just a couple years ago. She was standing in a local store looking at artificial Christmas trees being sold at clearance prices for \$5 a tree. She wanted to know if our youth group could buy some trees to donate to people around town who didn't have one. Or the time she went with us to volunteer at the Roanoke Rescue Mission in Roanoke, VA when she made sure we were providing the children who lived in the homeless shelter not just *a* snack, but a hearty, *healthy* snack because the children were worth our extra effort. Oh, how we need to hear the voices in the crowd reminding us to make room, and how thankful we are for those voices.

Over 500,000 people have been willing to share their most intimate secrets with the world by sending their anonymous postcards to a complete stranger in Washington, DC. For all we know, one of those cards was sent by the person sitting next to us. For all we know, one of those cards was sent by the woman trying to make her way through the crowd. Let's make room for the unclean. Let's make room for the sinner. Let's make room for the broken, the hurting and the one we don't quite understand. Let's make room.