

“The Crowds Were Astonished at His Teaching”

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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Why were the people astonished after Jesus spoke to them? The concluding verse of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, indicates that the people were astonished? I wonder if any of us felt astonishment when hearing the Gospel reading this morning? Did you? Did I? It's doubtful, and don't you wonder if we've lost our capacity to be astonished?

Isn't it amazing – or astonishing – that we can spend an hour together and by afternoon we usually have a difficult time recalling the content of the Gospel reading, let alone the sermon. Are we able to be astonished at the Word of the Lord?

It's not uncommon for us to react to some event or person by saying, “Nothing surprises me any more.” We take in a whole lot with a very nonchalant response.

Just think for a moment what we put up with and hardly “bat an eye” as the saying goes.

In 2006, 42,642 people were killed on our nation's streets, roads, and highways, and the average for the last ten years has been pretty much the same. Are you astonished? As a population, we sort of take this as “the cost of doing business.” Only if it is a loved one or someone we know is involved might we be astonished.

We are saddened by the loss of life in our armed services in Iraq which we should be. The News Hour with Jim Lehrer ends its broadcast about once a week with pictures of war casualties – shown with no comment or narrative. We all know that in the past six years that means about 4200 pictures have been shown. That leaves an impression.

Ten times that number are fatally injured on our streets, roads, and highways every year and we hardly hear about it unless it touches us personally. Astonished? I cannot see that we are. How about you?

In 2006, over 17,000 people were murdered in the US, and thankfully that's down from a peak of 24,700 in 1991. But 17,000 people killed. We almost expect that the local evening news will begin with a report on the most recent shooting or shootings. Are we astonished? Can we be astonished?

These are just a couple of negative facts of our common life. And negative statements are more often those that astonish us.

What about encouraging statements, constructive bits of information? And even more importantly for us as people of faith, how about the goodness of the Lord? How about the love of the Lord poured out for us that we might know how to be loving in our daily journeys?

Last Sunday and this morning we have read Gospel texts from the Sermon on the Mount, portions of Matthew 5-7. The passages have tried to help us comprehend what the Lord wants for us and from us. These words are to help, guide, and empower our lives for godly living. And after all this heavenly counsel, the final verse offers the summary that “they were astonished at his teaching...”

A good church member died and stood before Peter at the proverbial pearly gates, and when St. Peter saw him he gave him a warm welcome and then said, “There is a test to get in.” “A test,” the man exclaimed. I thought the love of God was sufficient. Then he thought to himself, I ought to be able to pass this test. Piece of cake. So he began:

I was raised in a faithful Christian home, baptized as an infant, and taken to church every Sunday. My parents taught me to pray as soon as I was able to talk, and they enrolled me in Sunday School the first year I was eligible for the beginning class. In fact, I have ten years perfect attendance, and it would have been more except I had strep throat one Sunday when I was eleven. I was confirmed when I was fourteen, went to church camp four summers in a row, and even went on a work camp to help the less fortunate.

St. Peter interrupted the man and said, “That’s one point.”

“One point,” the man replied with some frustration. Thinking that he had a big convincing job to do, he continued:

When my wife and I married, we decided to make our faith life a priority, So we went to church every Sunday, started giving generously and within five years of married life we were tithing. I served on the Council four terms In my adult years on earth, my wife and I sang in the choir for 30 years, and I tried to be very conscious of being a witness to God’s love with my neighbors and fellow workers.

St. Peter interrupted again, and said, “That’s two points.”

“Two points,” the man nearly shouted in exasperation. “The only way I’m going to get in here is by the grace of God.”

“One hundred points,” replied St. Peter. “Come in.”

We love to sing, “Amazing Grace.” Is it really amazing to us? Astonishing? Is the Word of the Lord so unlike anything else we hear that it truly surprises and astounds us?

The messages of daily, common life so emphasize the need to earn that we can hardly believe the Word of the Lord – the word of grace, forgiveness, guidance, and goodness.

The foundation spoken of in today's Gospel – the foundation of rock, not sand – is not our doing. It is a gift from the Lord Almighty. We are placed on a firm foundation and given caring people with whom to stand. That's amazing, astonishing, and may I share from my wife's and my personal experience that the Rock of salvation and the building blocks of Christian fellowship are overwhelming in their power.

“The crowds were astonished at his teaching,” reads Matthew 7:28. Lord, give us the capacity to be likewise astonished at your grace and mercy. Amen.