

Critical Mass

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Sermon for July 25, 2004

Lessons for date in Year A

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Colossians 2:6-15

Luke 11:1-13

What is critical mass? This is a very important question; and no, it's not a bunch of angry Catholics at church.

For those of you who never took physics, the dictionary defines it as the minimum amount of fissionable material needed to sustain a chain reaction. But why is it so important here?

Because it's the very question Abraham continually asked of God in today's lesson from Genesis.

When God announced his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the great wickedness there, Abraham asked what critical mass was. How many righteous people in the cities would it take for God to decide *not* to destroy them?

Would 50 be enough? How about 45? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? What is critical mass here?

What *is* critical mass? I suppose it depends on who's asking. If you're Jewish, a minyan, the minimum number of people needed in order for there to be a service, is ten. It's probably not a coincidence that this is the same as the number of righteous people needed in order for Sodom and Gomorrah to be spared.

What is critical mass for a Christian? I'd tend to say it's much smaller - after all, Jesus said that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, he is there among them.

Well, that's all fine and dandy for worship, but what about real life? What about the world at large? What is critical mass for getting God's attention? What is critical mass for bringing God's kingdom into the world we know? This is a difficult and troubling question.

As I think about all the righteous people, or at least all the people of good and sincere faith, who are constantly praying for all of the "right" things - peace, justice, love, the ability to know and follow the will of God - I'm struck by how many people there are praying for these things, and yet how we don't seem to have the results to show for their efforts.

Just what is critical mass here? How many people do we need praying for this stuff before God listens and actually does something about it? Are there not 50 people in the world worth listening to? How about 45? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? Not even two or three? Have we been sold a bill of goods here? Will God allow the seemingly few

righteous to be shouted down by the rest? Is it possible that despite our sincere good faith, those of us who are doing the praying aren't quite righteous enough to warrant being listened to?

In Luke, Jesus talks about perseverance in prayer, and seems to suggest that if we continually barrage God with our requests, he'll hear us and respond. And yet, to be honest, I have to tell you how tired I am of hearing that. Why does God, who is merciful and just, need to be harassed by me into doing the right thing? Shouldn't he do it simply because he is merciful and just? If I'm asking for the right things, then what does it matter how many times I ask, or how many people join me in asking? Why do either critical mass or perseverance matter?

Doesn't God understand that the longer so many of us ask and see no results, the harder it is for us to come back and ask again? Doesn't God understand that when we knock and the door remains closed, when we ask and receive nothing, and when we seek without finding, that this just discourages us?

But maybe, just maybe, I miss the point here, although I'm not sure I know how. And, of course, if I knew how, I wouldn't be missing the point, now would I?

Maybe I'm impatient - but if I'm impatient, it's an impatience that's as much *for God* as *with God*.

Perhaps I'm being a little selfish here. After all, people long before me have probably wondered what critical mass was. Why do I think that I should get the answer that they didn't? What makes me so special? Why should I be part of the critical mass

that finally gets things done when they weren't?

And maybe I forget about the ink.

Quite a while back, I forget where, I read a discussion of why we even need the different service academies when so many more military officers are trained at less expense through college ROTC programs. The response centered on a glass of water and a drop of blue ink.

You see, the glass of water represented all of the military officers trained in ROTC programs. The one drop of blue ink represented those trained at West Point, Annapolis, and the Air Force Academy. When you put that one drop of blue ink into the water it doesn't just sit in one place, it disperses itself and changes the character of the entire glass of water.

Perhaps we, as Christians, are like that drop of ink to the rest of the world. We haven't made it perfect, and we may never do so of our own, but, despite our many flaws, we have helped change the character of the world to make it a better place.

And maybe I forget about the speed of the reaction.

You know, despite what they might have said about them rotting your brains, it's amazing what you can learn from comic books. As a kid, I learned from reading **The Legion of Superheroes** that fire and rusting are simply different versions of the process of oxidation, with fire being the faster, less controlled version.

It occurs to me that maybe the speed at which we'd like to see God work is more along the lines of a flash fire or even an explosion, both of which are incredibly

destructive. Perhaps there's a reason why God prefers to work change in the world at a speed that we would consider similar to rusting. A certain amount of fire can heat or purify, while too much can destroy. As unsatisfying as it may sound, maybe God works slowly for our sake and the sake of those who aren't ready to hear him yet.

Similarly, that sustainable chain reaction I talked about at the beginning can either light up a city or destroy it, depending on how controlled it is. There are many Christians out there who would actually be quite happy with destroying the world, as they smugly assume that they will be saved from the very destruction they look forward to. Yet Jesus says that we are to be the *light* of the world. That seems to imply to me a much slower reaction, with results that are not immediate and violent, but that instead occur slowly over time with as little damage as possible.

So what is critical mass? Going back to that glass of water and the blue ink, perhaps it's two or three drops here, 10 drops there, dispersed throughout the entire world. And going back to the speed of the reaction, maybe it means that we don't get the big changes we want to see here and now for ourselves, but the little changes that slowly help to bring about God's kingdom here on earth for *all* - in the way that *God* thinks is best.

And perhaps it *is* a bunch of angry Catholics in church, and the not so angry ones too - along with Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, all types of Lutherans, and anyone else who dares and cares enough to ask the question.

What is critical mass? We are! And we are part of God's ongoing reaction.

This is most certainly true.