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Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life

Bruce E. Shields



When this sermon was preached in the chapel at Emmanuel School of Religion, the congregation sang the individual stanzas of the hymn of the same name to introduce and reinforce the sermon thought as it was developed. The hymn was written by Frank Mason North in 1903. It is usually sung to the melody "Germany" from William Gardiner's Sacred Melodies, 1815.

Where cross the crowded ways
of life,
Where sound the cries of race
and clan,
Above the noise of selfish strife
We hear your voice, O Son of
Man!

The noise of the street corner tends to drown out for most of us the voice of the Son of Man. The percentage continues to grow of the people of this world who live in cities—cities of twenty thousand, of a hundred thousand, of a million, and soon of fifteen or twenty million.

Within a few years, the most populous city in the world will be Mexico City. By the turn of the century, there are expected to be more city dwellers than there were people in 1960.

The city is crowded; it's full of selfish complaints; it's noisy; it's polluted; it's where the people are—and too often, it's where the gospel isn't.

In haunts of wretchedness and
need,
On shadowed thresholds dark
with fears,
From paths where hide the lures
of greed
We catch the vision of your tears.

The city is a fearsome place, especially for us who have not grown up there. There is poverty in the city—and disease. There is violent crime in the city—and apathy. There is darkness in the daytime and light at night. There is temptation on every hand. We don't even want our children to see many parts of the

city—although we find those parts strangely fascinating ourselves.

It is a profane place, the city. The few church buildings still in use seem starkly out of place. The people go about their business with no thought of God. "We don't need God," their lives say. "What has God ever done for us?" Such pragmatism is a mark of the age in which we live. We tend to evaluate everything and everybody on the basis of what it or they can do for us. There are very few daffodils in the city, so why should anybody bother to try to smell them on the way to work?

From tender childhood's
helplessness,
From woman's grief, man's
burdened toil,
From famished souls, from
sorrow's stress,
Your heart has never known
recoil.

There is life in the city—too much life, perhaps, for our tastes—

but life nevertheless. There are children growing up, all too fast. There are working, grieving men and women. There are people bearing terrible burdens—people who seem to be sad all the time.

Most of all, there are lonely people. Women and men, young and old, who are cut off from their relatives and friends, who are afraid to try to make new friends. Many have never known a father's love. Many have never been able to trust enough to develop a close relationship. There is sex, of course, but precious little love. People who cannot possibly get acquainted with all their neighbors find it difficult to get acquainted with any of them.

The cup of water given for you
Still holds the freshness of your
grace;

Yet long these multitudes to view
The strong compassion of your
face.

There is very little compassion to be found in the city, and even less giving of the self for others. Oh, there are individuals and (more commonly) organizations that offer food, drink, a place to sleep. But it's hard to find a pat on the back, a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on.

But there are so many people there, we say. Millions in New York City, in Los Angeles, in Tokyo, in Hong Kong. What can we do with so many people?

Does that question sound vaguely familiar? Five loaves and

two fish. "What are these among so many?" Eleven half-ready men—to "all the nations"? How can we? It's strange that the early church was not stymied by that question. They formed themselves in the nearest big city—Jerusalem—to await power. Soon after they received that power, they were making an impact on Damascus, Antioch, Caesarea, Ephesus, Corinth, Athens, Alexandria, and even Rome. The mission strategy of earliest Christianity was simply "Go where the most people are, establish churches in those population centers, and let them evangelize the countryside." Our recent strategy seems to be "Go where the fewest people are, establish nice homogeneous congregations in nice rural and suburban villages, and let the cities go to hell!"

O Master from the mountainside,
Make haste to heal these hearts
of pain;
Among these restless throngs
abide,
O tread the city's streets again;

No, we really don't want the cities to go to hell. We wish the Lord would do something about that great need. A few of his disciples are floundering out there, wishing he would return from that Mount of Transfiguration and cast this demon out, but the miracle is delayed.

Don't we realize that if he did come he would ask why we couldn't do it? Too much easy living and not enough praying, he said to those

followers in the valley. Get serious: people, the nations, the world—that is our commission. And the power of his presence—that is our promise.

Do you see what we have really been singing about? Not the crowds and cries, not the helplessness and grief, not the longing and the pain. We have sung about the voice of the Son of Man, the vision of *his* tears, the love of *his* heart, the compassion of *his face*—*his* treading those city streets. The gospel for the street corner is not ours, nor is the ability to heal or to comfort, or to reconcile, or to save.

We can offer calm assurance, unconditional friendship, real comfort only as we offer the love of God.

Let's stand and sing together stanza 6 of our hymn:

Till all the world shall learn your
love
And follow where your feet have
trod:
Till glorious from your heaven
above
Shall come the city of our God.

Benediction: "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Phil 4:19 NIV).

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