



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

“Wanting to Satisfy the Crowd”

Mark 15:15

Rev. David K. Groth

“And they cried out again, ‘Crucify him.’ And Pilate said to them, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Crucify him.’ So Pilate, wanting to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified” (Mark 15:15).

Palm Sunday
March 24, 2013

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

When we lived in St. Louis, one of the few places I could take the dog for a long, untethered walk was to the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. One day there were hundreds upon hundreds of European Starlings out there. I've never seen a larger flock of birds. And they were moving as one creature, like a giant and fast moving amoeba in the sky, surging and swaying about. You've seen this before. Somehow they were on the same wave-length, spontaneously changing directions, diving, turning, swooping, all as one. After a time they would go back to perch and rest on the tall Cottonwood trees, and then launch again. How so many birds could act as one body, I have no idea, but you can observe the same behavior in schools of fish and herds of gazelles. You can also observe it in crowds of people.

I'm thinking of the student section at a UW football game. It's filled with mostly reasonable and rational individuals. But on game days, they are in a crowd, shouting things they would otherwise never shout, at each other, at the refs. Individuals do things in a crowd they wouldn't otherwise do. They do it because there's pressure to conform. They do it because there's a need for acceptance and a sense of belonging. They do it also because a crowd offers a certain amount of anonymity. They do it because there's a diffusion of responsibility or guilt. If it were just one person yelling obscenities at the ref after the game, he might be arrested for disorderly conduct. But it's harder to arrest an entire crowd.

We are all influenced by crowd behavior. Sometimes it's harmless. We assume a crowded restaurant must be serving good food, or it wouldn't be busy. If a certain stock becomes a hot pick, we might be inclined to buy it also because we assume if a crowd is doing it, it's probably worth doing. You might play different music

with a group of friends than you would if you were alone . . . because the crowd might ridicule your musical preferences. And many of you don't wear white pants after Labor Day. Politicians drift left or right depending on the mood of their constituents. If on Black Friday the doors open at Best Buy and most of the crowd surges in one direction, you might be inclined to run with them and see what the crowd thinks is a great deal. Occasionally crowds turn ugly. Herd behavior turns into mob mentality.

Insanity is rare in individuals, but not so much in crowds. Violence, indecency, lunacy, idiocy . . . all these can take hold of a crowd. I'm thinking of a recent soccer game in Egypt where 74 died in the riot that followed the match. I'm thinking of what happened on a bus in India not too long ago. I'm thinking of some of the things that were chanted by protestors in Wisconsin's state capital. I'm thinking of the Burning Man Festival. We tend to think there's less guilt in a crowd because it's evenly distributed on each head. But not in God's eyes.

How about you? How do you do in a crowd? Study after study reveals you and I say and do things in a crowd we would otherwise never say or do, even if it conflicts with our own beliefs, even if we know it's wrong. When the crowd is moving and acting as one organism, it's hard to be that single voice, that individual, that contrarian. It's so much easier to fly with the flock rather than against it. It's so much easier to be unfaithful, if being faithful draws the scorn and rejection of a crowd.

This morning we heard about two very different crowds in Jerusalem. One loves Jesus. The other hates him. One crowd waves palm branches, the other shakes their fists. One lays their cloaks on the ground. The other spits. One shouts "Hosanna!" The other: "Crucify!"

Let's think about that angry crowd for a moment. Pluck one of those hot-headed individuals out of the crowd and put him alone in the room with Pilate and Jesus, would he still be so belligerent and demanding? Not likely. But he's *not* alone. He's been ingested by the crowd,

metabolized into it.

How do you do in a crowd? You and I might never have been involved in a crowd like the one calling for his crucifixion. But succumbing to the crowd for us happens in between sips of the morning coffee as we read the newspaper or listen to the talk show or log on to the social networks. Succumbing to the herd mentality can happen, in spite of our faith, as we sit quietly in a college lecture hall and tweak our faith so that it is more in line with the crowd. Succumbing to the crowd happens on the grade school playground. It happens in the frat house. It happens in the corporate boardroom.

There are times when the Christian is called to risk life and limb for the faith. Normally you and I, however, are called to be faithful in much more quiet and ordinary circumstances, though no less important. When we cave in to the crowd, there is a sense in which we are letting some other guy (namely the personality of the crowd) make decisions for us. We are abdicating our responsibilities, and are no longer thinking for ourselves. We are handing over our voice and our vote to what can be an idiot (the crowd) and are not being the thoughtful, responsible men and women God has called us to be.

The very first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods." That is, we are to fear, love and trust in him above all things, not the crowd. Exodus 23 says, "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong" (v. 2). Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men." And then there's the warning of Jesus, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it" (Mt. 7:13).

That first Good Friday, we can sense Pilate's heart is not in it. He wants no part in crucifying an innocent man. Nor does he want to be pushed around by a bunch of fanatics. But even the Roman Governor has a healthy respect for a large, volatile crowd. He knows that loud, angry crowds can bring down kings and autocrats, presidents and dynasties. (Think Arab Spring.) But it's not that kind of crowd just yet, so Pilate is cautiously resisting the crowd.

It's mild, but you got to hand it to Pilate. He's trying to protect Jesus even when Jesus won't protect himself. Meanwhile, the crowd is growing in size and anger and volume, because that's what crowds often do. Bystanders assume that if the crowd is doing it, it might be worth doing. Plus, it's a chance for them to yell at the Roman Governor with impunity, and they don't often get to do that. So this crowd is growing and morphing, and Pilate can sense he's losing control.

A rule of thumb: those in power, when pressed, will go to great lengths to preserve their power. And that's precisely what happened 2,000 years ago. Verse 13, "They cried out again, 'Crucify him.' And Pilate said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him.' So Pilate, wanting to satisfy the crowd, (not God, not the scales of justice, not his own conscience), "Pilate, wanting to satisfy the crowd had Jesus scourged and delivered him to be crucified." In Luke's version, he writes, "they went on yelling that he should be crucified, and their shouting prevailed."

Pilate sees the crowd as a bellowing brute that could bring an end to his authority. In Pilate's eyes, the crowd is not a collection of individuals, but rather one organism, a hungry, muscular monster that will feed not just on Jesus but on Pilate too, if he's not careful.

Conversely, when Jesus looks out at the crowd, he doesn't see a monster. He doesn't even see a crowd. He sees individuals. Walter Wangerin wrote, "Jesus sees the crowd as persons, individuals to be redeemed, sheep in need of a shepherd, captives to be freed . . ." He sees them as "children, little children lost whom he came to seek and to save. If there's a brute about, that brute is Lucifer. . . But even the swollen-throated bellowers in the crowd are *people* to Jesus, whom he regards one by one, whom he does not fear, but whom he is serving right now – right now! – by giving his life to ransom them from the very brutishness they are displaying" (*Reliving the Passion*, p. 105).

Those in power will go to great lengths to preserve their power, but not Jesus. Remember the epistle lesson. "...though he being in very nature God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped" (something to be clung to no matter what), but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant (slave also works) . . . he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even

death on a cross.” Jesus didn’t see a crowd. He saw individuals in desperate need of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Also today, when Jesus looks at a crowd, he sees individuals, in need of his blood. When Jesus looks at this group of 18, he doesn’t see a small crowd in white. He sees individuals whom he loves, whom he knows by name, and individuals baptized into his name. He knows everything about you, your DNA because he knit it together, your hopes and dreams and fears, because he can read you like a book, even the number of hairs on your head because he cares for you. He sees also sinners in need of his body and blood and now ready for the same. He sees young men and women who have faith, saving faith, precious faith, faith worth protecting and feeding. He sees young men and women with so much potential. And he has plans for each of you, not to hurt you but to prosper you, to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11).

There is no crowd here, only individuals whom he knows and loves and for whom he died, individuals who let themselves get digested by crowds, and cease thinking for themselves, but individuals he loves nonetheless, individuals whom he cleanses with his blood.

There is no crowd here, but there is one holy communion, one body. . . one hope to which you were called, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:5).

There is no crowd here, but there is the people of God, redeemed, made holy by him, without blemish actually, because he gave himself up for his church, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.

There is no crowd here, but there is a church, or a Paul writes, a bride beautifully dressed without spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Eph. 5:25ff). Amen.

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