

Jesus and the Crowd
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
March 20, 2022-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Mark 15:6-15

Today is our third sermon in our sermon series for Lent. The sermon series is called ‘Christ. Alone,’ and it follows Jesus through the gospel of Mark. In his gospel, Mark shows Jesus interacting with various groups and institutions on his way to the cross—the family, the religious authorities, the governmental powers. We’ve looked carefully at those interactions to learn something about the place of these institutions in our life. And we’ve watched these interactions to learn more about following Jesus. Today we will focus on Jesus’ interaction with a very interesting group. Today we will look at the crowd. We will study how Jesus reacts to the crowd and how the crowd reacts to Jesus. In the gospel of Mark, the crowd functions like a character. Mark writes about the crowd coming into contact with Jesus 36 separate times. The crowd acts, the crowd speaks, the crowd rejoices, the crowd lashes out. The crowd is a character in this gospel. And the crowd is a character in our Bible passage. Jesus is standing before Pilate. He’s on trial before the Roman governor, but the characters in this courtroom drama are not just Pilate and Jesus; it’s Pilate, Jesus, and the crowd.

For most of the gospel, the crowd has been on Jesus’ side. If you go back and look at all 36 times the crowd makes an appearance in the gospel and if you were to look at the crowd’s reactions, they are mostly favorable. The crowd is pro-Jesus. Jesus is the reason that the crowd forms. They come for his teaching, they come for his healing, they literally chase him all over Galilee. In chapter 6, the crowd follows him around the sea of Galilee. In chapter 4, when he preached in Capernaum, so many people come to hear him, he had to get in a boat and set out a little from shore so he has room to preach. And then when Jesus finally leaves Galilee and comes to Jerusalem, as he enters the city the crowds greet him as a conqueror. They shout, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the son of David!” Mostly, the crowds love Jesus.

But toward the end of his life, the crowd turns. Jesus’ approval rating falls off a cliff. By the time we get to our text, the crowd is against him. It’s not just that the crowd has abandoned Jesus. It’s not that they aren’t paying attention, it’s that they’ve turned against him. In fact, it’s their shouting and pressure that seems to push Pilate to crucifixion. “What crime has he committed?” Asks Pilate. But the crowd does what crowds do. They push and clamor. They shout all the louder, “Crucify Him!”

If the crowd is a character in Mark, how would you describe its personality? How would you describe its character, its behavior? The crowd is passionate! The crowd is not reserved. It shouts and crowds. Its opinions are strong and emotional. The crowd is influential. As we heard last week when we studied the religious leaders and as we see today when we watch Pilate give in to the shouting, Mark’s crowd affects the behavior of others. And finally, the crowd is fickle. Its tastes and opinions change as quickly as the Michigan weather. One moment they are all sunshine; the next moment they are a menacing storm.

That’s not just true in Mark, that’s how crowds behave through the whole Bible. Another story where the crowd functions like a character is found in Acts 14. When Paul and Barnabas are in Lystra, they are preaching the gospel and they heal a man who was lame. Just as they did for Jesus, the crowd moves towards them with approval. Maybe you remember what they said,

they said, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” They called Paul Hermes and they called Barnabas Zeus. Doesn’t get more positive than that. Paul and Barnabas say that they are not gods, and only two verses later some people come to town and start badmouthing the disciples and in no time at all the crowd swings completely in the other direction. They stone Paul, drag him outside the city and leave him for dead. One moment they say, ‘you are gods!’ The next moment they’re trying to kill them. Crowds are emotional, they are influential and they are changeable.

The fact is, Mark’s portrait of the crowd is very close to the behavior of crowds as we observe them today and as crowd behavior is described by modern social science. Crowd behavior is studied pretty carefully these days. Marketers and politicians are very interested in how crowds behave so there is lots of money for research. And they find pretty much what Mark describes. Crowds are tendentious. That’s a beautiful word. Tendentious. I learned that word in seminary when Neal Plantinga used it in his lectures and we students all looked at each other and wondered what he was talking about. To be tendentious is to ‘tend towards extremes.’ To have a strong editorial bias. It’s the opposite of measured or careful. Crowds are tendentious. Modern research shows that when people get together in groups of like-minded people, their opinions become more strongly held. So an individual may oppose the death penalty and if you ask him about it in private he will express his opinion in measured terms. But get him in a crowd of like-minded people and his opposition will become more forceful and more firmly held. Same thing for pro-death penalty people. A crowd is tendentious. And this works on both the intellect and the emotional level. Whatever your opinion on whatever matter, if you get together with a crowd of people who are like minded, you will hold your opinion with more certainty and you will express it with more emotion.

That also means crowds are incredibly formative. Crowds shape your behavior. I know we all like to pretend that we are self-contained individuals who make our own decisions. “I don’t care what everyone else thinks! I am my own man!” I know we like to say things like that, but the research suggests otherwise. There was a really interesting study I read about this week. At Arizona’s Petrified Forest National Park, the rangers were worried about people taking pieces of petrified wood home as souvenirs. They wanted to discourage the practice and as part of that they did a little experiment. At one of the trails they put up a sign that said, “Your heritage is being vandalized every day by theft losses of petrified wood of 14 tons a year, mostly a small piece at a time.” On the other trail they didn’t put up any sign at all. Guess which trail recorded more theft? The one with the sign! The sign told visitors that a whole lot of other people were taking wood and that gave them permission. When they picked up the wood they were joining a crowd. It makes a kind of perverse sense. We are all affected by crowds. When you drive in a foreign country, what determines your speed? Is it the posted speed limit? Certainly I look at that, but mostly I look at the crowd. How fast is everyone else driving on the autobahn? How fast are they going on the Motorway? If everyone is going 20 miles an hour over the posted speed limit, I’m going with them.

People often talk about crowds as a negative phenomenon. And you can understand why. Crowd behavior can be brutal. People do and say things in crowds that they would never do or say on their own. The rioters in Lystra stoning Paul half to death. The rioters in Jerusalem grabbing Stephen and stoning him all the way to death. The crowd in our passage shouting “crucify him!” at the top of their lungs hungry for blood. Watching modern TV footage of crowds swept up in anger, looting, rioting, and causing mayhem. All these things cause us to

think of crowd behavior as something dangerous. All of these things cause us to tell our children, Don't go along with the crowd!

But crowds are not just bad. They are also good. Whether or not a crowd is good, depends on the spirit that animates the crowd. It's true that some of the worst behaviors we know are crowd behaviors, but if you think back over your life some of the best times we have are in crowds. You were at that game where your team came back and won the game on that last second basket. The crowd went crazy. It was so good. Or at your graduation when you all threw your hat in the air and celebrated together. So good. Or that Easter service when everyone was together and you sang that hymn and the trumpets played the descant above the hymn and the church shook with the sound of the voices. Glorious. Crowds can be terrible, but they can be great too. There are also times when going along with the crowd is wonderful.

How does Jesus react to the crowd? What is his reaction to them? How does he feel about this mass of humanity with our needs and our faithless hearts? How does he see the crowd? Mark tells us. In chapter 6, Jesus has been looking for a little rest. He's been looking to get away. So he and his disciples get in a boat and head off to a remote place on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But when they get there, a crowd has followed him. Thousands of needy people. "Jesus help me! Jesus heal me! Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Please! Please! Please!" What's Jesus' reaction to this mass of brokenness and need? *"When Jesus saw the large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."*

How does Jesus see the crowd? How does Jesus see those people storming the capitol? How does he see those BLM people smashing windows in downtown GR? How does Jesus see the mob screaming at Pilate, crucify him? How does Jesus see this crowd here, us with all our strong opinions, with all our hidden sins, with all our deep needs? Jesus looks at us and loves us because we are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He hates our sin. He hates the chaos we create. He hates our fighting. But he loves us. He loves us so much, he dies for us.

And in his death and by his death he is creating a new crowd. You see, ultimately it's not about staying away from crowds, it's about being part of the right crowd. We are social creatures. God created us for community. We are meant to be formed in community. It's not a question of whether or not you will be part of a crowd; it's a question of which crowd you belong to. Which crowd will form you? What crowd will you run with and what tendencies will that crowd form in you? Want to know who you are becoming? Ask yourself, what's my crowd? Who are the people that I act with and share common cause?

You know who Jesus' crowd is? It's us. When you gather with this crowd every week around Jesus and his cross, it forms you. If crowds are tendentious, through the power of the Spirit, this crowd forms Jesus tendencies in us. That's why we are here every week. We want this crowd to form us. And so we gather every week and we sing and we pray and we talk and we praise. Week after week the Spirit grows the life of Jesus in us because that's how it works with crowds. This is our crowd. It's not the in-crowd. It's not the happening crowd. It's the Jesus crowd.

And this crowd is bigger than you think. Even when numbers are down, the crowd is bigger than you think. Because the Bible tells us that we are part of that great cloud of witnesses. Hebrews 12 has that beautiful image. The author of Hebrews calls us to keep going, to run the race set out for us, he calls us to center our eyes on Jesus and his cross as we go. Because that's the center of this crowd. But he also tells us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We never run this race alone, we are always surrounded by all the faithful departed. All the

saints and angels. All those who have been faithful in the fight are cheering us on as we run our race.

It's like the chute at the end of a marathon. You're the runner and you're completely exhausted. The race is so long and you are tired, but on either side of you a huge crowd of people is cheering you on. Elijah is there. He's yelling, "I know you feel alone and a little depressed sometimes like the whole world is against you but keep going! You're not alone!" Peter is there. He's saying, "I know you've messed up but Jesus doesn't give up on failures, believe me. I know." Mary is there and she's saying, "I know it might feel like the task is too big for a little person like you but God will give you the strength." Maybe some of your departed family members are there and they're yelling as well, "I know you doubt sometimes, but don't be afraid, it's all true and it's better than you could even hope." And of course Jesus is there, but he's not in the stands. He's running beside you, and he's saying "nothing can take you out of my hands. That's our crowd. Us, them, Jesus at the center. His bread our food, his promises behind us his hope before us.

© Rev. Peter Jonker