

Never Trust a Mob of People

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Matthew 21:1-11

“The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee’”

There is power with a crowd, the masses, and the gathered people. In the short story, “The New Moon Party” written by T. C. Boyle, (found in *Tales of Greasy Lake and Other Stories*) a political candidate who was running for office needed an edge; he needed something to set him apart from the rest of the group. His wife looked up in the sky and claimed, “we need a new moon,” and his platform was created. The idea took off, the crowds rallied and the candidate quickly became the frontrunner in the race. In this story the populace became so excited about the possibility of putting a new moon in the sky that public opinion would have nothing to do with any other policy or program. Now we may think that perhaps a new moon is not the best of ideas, and I’ll leave you to read the story to find out the ending, but in the story, the crowds, the masses make that idea important, powerful, and the center of political conversation. This is the power of the masses, the populace, and the crowd writ large.

Think about your own experiences. Have you ever been at a folk, rock, or any other kind of concert and felt the electricity of the crowd? Have you ever been at a political rally and could feel yourself caught up in the emotions? Have you ever been to a school spirit rally and felt the “spirit” move you? In college I once attended a Bluegrass concert. I wasn’t a big fan of bluegrass at the time, but the locals from upstate New York filled the hall, hooted, hollered, and the walls shook. By the end of the show, I was so overwhelmed that I was ready to put on my flannel shirt, grab a fiddle, and play some good ole’ bluegrass. That’s the power of the crowd. The overall ethos, emotional content, and direction of a crowd can grab you; sweep you up, and like a rushing river of water move you to an emotional place you’ve never been before. One of the ideas of the Promise Keeper Movement is that there is something powerful about bringing thousands of men together in the same place and the same time. The emotional output of the crowd is overwhelming. Maybe you have felt this at a church service, prayer service, or even when watching a crowd on television. Indeed there is power in the crowd.

Normally there is something that incites excitement in a crowd. There is a focus, a focal point, or a reason for people to gather and get excited. Today, in scripture, a crowd gathers around the focal point of Christ entering into Jerusalem, the holy city. Many have been waiting a long time for this moment. Many have read the writings of Isaiah and Zechariah telling of the king’s triumphant and humble entry into Jerusalem on a donkey rather than on a great war horse. Many have heard of Jesus’ ministry in the outlying lands, and held to a hope that he indeed was the next king, the next messiah, and the next ruler to bring Israel to glory. For three years they waited as rumors and stories trickled through the land about this Jesus of Nazareth, and now the time had finally come. Can you imagine the excitement in the crowd when they saw Jesus coming down the road on a donkey, just as the prophets proclaimed he would? Can you imagine

the hope and passion they felt as their proclaimed leader was beginning to walk into the path of prophecy? This is it! This is the moment, the point in time when things would change, when Israel would return to glory, when the oppressors from Rome would be cast out, and when a new time would begin!

Can you relate to this feeling, this experience that many in the crowd felt? Think of the families here in the United States with a loved one in the military overseas. Their lives have changed, their circumstances have changed, and most of the family members look to that day when their husband, wife, mother, father, sister, brother, daughter or son will return. Think about the family's anticipation and the hope that someday life will resume the normalcy that they once had with the return of their loved one. Imagine the excitement and the anticipation, and then multiply that anticipation to an entire town when a whole battalion returns. This excitement and anticipation is greater than a child's anticipation on Christmas Eve, and it still just begins to touch the fervor of today's crowd as Jesus enters into Jerusalem. You see, for too long the people had to pay homage to Rome, taxes to Rome, and suffer humiliation by the Romans. For too long they wondered if God still favored them or if God had left them because they lacked a truly anointed leader. For too long did they feel scattered and abandoned. It comes to no surprise why the words from Psalm 118 are on the lips of the crowd as they surround Jesus: "Hosanna Lord; save us Lord!" For salvation is desperately needed.

Can we cry with the people as well? Can we hope that with Christ's entry into Jerusalem we will be freed from suffering, freed from oppression, freed from hate, and freed from death? Can we cry out as well, "Lord save us, for we desperately need salvation. Save us from the demands of the world for our loyalty, our time, our resources, and our lives. Save us from the pressures for power and success. Save us from violence and exclusion. Save us from the isolation, the bickering, the arguing, and the close-mindedness that we experience in our world and in our churches." Can we join the crowd and wave our own palms in hope of triumph?

Here he comes, the one who helped the blind to see, the lame to walk, and brought words of grace and love to the poor. Here he comes, the one who speaks of the Kingdom of God with authority and power. Here he comes, the one who brings fulfillment to the scriptures, the prophets, and hopes to the people. Here comes the one who promises a kingdom of peace, equality, and love. Here comes the one who makes us whole. The crowd has gathered, we have gathered, and we see Christ on the horizon, and his entry is enough to cause excitement and anticipation. This is an event worthy to incite hope and passion in the crowd.

And the excitement of the crowd is contagious, affecting the very walls of Jerusalem. The city is in turmoil, or as Eugene Peterson writes in his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, "The whole city was shaken," and the people were "unnerved." The crowd's excitement affects all those gathered, all those around, and the city itself. We've seen this power of crowds before, haven't we? We've seen crowds unnerving cities before. Remember the riots just after King died? There are still city blocks burned down in Boston, which have yet to be rebuilt. Remember the riots in L.A. in the 1990s, or even more recent, the crowds of people in the Ukraine demanding democracy, and the crowds of people in Lebanon for and against the Syrians. This is the power of the mob, the crowd that can shake the very foundations of the earth and change the direction of the winds. And this is the power of the crowd rushing into Jerusalem, like a river of water rushing into its streets, grabbing hold of all in its path, its current strong and direct.

Do you think that maybe others in the city were taken in by the excitement and anticipation? Do you think maybe others began to hold up their own arms in the air and shout "Hosanna," believing that Christ was the one to save and change the world?

In 1906 a small, old building on 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles was the place of some miraculous healings through the power and movement of the Holy Spirit. The word got out, and more and more came to worship and to experience the healing. Soon the world, moved by the crowd of worshippers gathering in that simple building in California, was asking what was going on, unnerved and shaken. The revival lasted three years, and is considered by many to have been

the origin of today's Pentecostal movement. The excitement of the crowd spread and challenged the city and the world surrounding it. This is partly the idea of liberation theology articulated by Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and others. It is the idea that the people are the ones who guide the church, in the midst of the gathered crowds is where theology begins, and the church must stay aware of the needs, desires, and experiences of the people. The crowd affects the world and the church. So we look to the experience of the crowd, and see it catching others, we feel the excitement spreading into the city and the world. We want to spread it, share it, and invite others to be a part of the joyous group. After all, this is the messiah who promises hope that the Kingdom of God will reign; he promises hope that mercy, righteousness and justice will flow like streams. He brings a hope that all of God's children will be accepted, loved, and cherished, and that God's rule will triumph. This is the hope proclaimed with Christ's entry into Jerusalem, and the excitement of the crowd shakes the walls of our church, of our world all the way to Jerusalem itself.

But the excitement, the fervor of the crowd can easily change, be swayed and be manipulated. This is the danger of the mob mentality, that reason, perspective, and calm thoughts do not rule the direction of the mob. No, instead we need to be careful, we must keep our wits about us, and to hold on to our own convictions so as we are not completely taken in by the currents of the crowd. Look ahead in the week to Friday, and remember what the crowd was doing then. The cries for crucifixion, the anger, hurt and rage come from this same crowd, this same mass of people shouting hope and joy with the entrance of Christ. Listen closely to what they are crying and maybe we can understand why this crowd turns. Son of David, they call him. A king, a leader, one to sit again on the throne is what the crowd is expecting. Power, might, military triumph, destruction of enemies, and even more power are what the crowd is expecting. We cry with the crowd, "save us, Lord," but what happens when our salvation is not what we expect?

This is the danger of the crowd, for when the communal expectations are not met, then what does the crowd do but turn a different direction. Then, they crucified Jesus with a feeling of betrayal on their minds, but now we ignore Jesus and hoist up our own messiah, the messiah of the gilded cross and the soft cushion. The messiah of politics and national might, the messiah of power, the messiah of Biblical control, and the messiah of exclusion are all held up in Jesus' place. Remember that Jesus goes from here into the temple, and turns over the tables, challenging the establishment. We don't like that and so we crucify Jesus again and again by ignoring, controlling, and telling Jesus how to act as our messiah. In a true Feuerbachian fashion we project our needs and desires on Christ and make him the strong hero, the superman who will smash the Romans of yesterday and today.

Have you seen the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*? The main character, Lawrence, struggled with his own delusions of grandeur, and the projection of others that he was the great leader of the Arabs after WWII. Yet he was still an Englishman, and could never be the Arab he yearned to be. This is what we do to Christ, we project, force and turn with the crowd in one-way or another. Perhaps we don't follow this same crowd to the cross yelling "crucify," but the crowd of the world again and again carries the one labeled "hero" and nails him again and again to the cross. Power, greed, anger, hate all are the nails with which we crucify our Lord. Violence in the home, violence in the streets, violence in the world (and remember that violence occurs on many levels) and a reluctance to act are all ways that we turn our back on this humble messiah riding in on a donkey. We can be and the world is the crowd, the ones easily turned. Yes the crowd cannot be trusted for it is easily changed, swayed and manipulated.

So we must stand strong and stay true to Christ. Especially in this time, especially in this week, we must keep our eyes on Christ. The crowd will turn from him in ways we cannot expect, predict, or control, so let us keep our eyes on Christ. This is the time when we are called to stand up as Christians, to claim the glory in the weakness and the defeat of the cross, and to go with Christ all the way to the mount of skulls. The crowd will call us to fight, to make a celebration

out of it, or to even skip the crucifixion and jump to Easter – but keep your eyes on Christ. Christ walks to Golgotha, despite the jeers. Christ mounts the cross, despite the pain, and Christ dies the death, despite the possible glory of angles around him. Keep your eyes on Christ, not the distractions of the world around you, the crowd trying to pull you one way or the other.

In the movie, *The Mission*, a Jesuit mission is under threat of attack. One priest, played by Robert DeNiro who was previously a soldier feels that it is best to stand and fight. The other played by Jeremy Irons claims that the way of Christ is sacrifice and love. DeNiro's character heard the crowd calling Christ to power and might, and followed the crowd. Irons' character saw Christ mounting again the cross, and kept his eyes on that cross.

This is my challenge for you this week, this most holy week. Will you say, "yes" to Christ, walk with Christ, and stay with Christ at the cross? There will be times when we find ourselves caught up with the crowd – caught up in the glory, glamour, and the excitement. Catch yourself, catch others, and call them back to the person Christ. There will be times when we will be tempted and challenged to keep our eyes on the true messiah, not the one created by the world, but one who came and walked with us in the world. Let us keep our eyes on Christ. Of all weeks, this is the week when we are put to the test, when the pull of the crowd is strongest, loudest, and very well articulated.

Will you have the humility and the courage to walk with Christ? Will you have the fortitude and the strength to live in the way Christ sets before us – a way which is weak in the world, but strong in the Lord? This is a way of peace, a way of love, a way of righteousness, and a way of justice – will you say, "yes" to that way. For if you do, then hold onto your palm, for there will be a time this week when you will again want to utter those words cried out today – Hosanna, Lord save us!

AMEN