

28 March 2021
Palm Sunday

The Wisdom of Crowds
Luke 19:29-40

This year for Palm Sunday, we read the story of Jesus' Triumphant Entry from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 19, verses 29-40:

*²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it." ' ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' ³⁴They said, 'The Lord needs it. ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'
³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' ⁴⁰He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'*

In last year's Palm Sunday sermon, I admitted that I had always had reservations about this church celebration, where we remember the crowd's joyous response to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. My reservations have entirely to do with the fact that five days later the same crowd were standing outside Pilate's headquarters shouting "Give us, Barabbas!" and "Crucify him!" The crowd loved him on Sunday, but had made a 180 degree turn by Friday. In the Gospel of John, we read that Jesus did not trust the crowds who were believing in him, because he knew what people were like (John 2:24). Turns out he was right.

And you could argue that to this day crowds remain untrustworthy. You can apparently gather a crowd for any pretext – either a valid reason or one based on lies. And even if you gather a crowd what is a valid reason, you can't trust it to stick to its purpose. This week, you may have read, a large crowd gathered in Bristol, England, to protest some new rules that would allow police to crack down on protests. So you got that? Bristol had proposed some new laws, permitting the police more leeway in shutting down protesters, so people protested. In the process of that protest against protest-limits, twenty police officers were injured, one seriously, and several police vehicles were set on fire. Whatever message the protest organizers hoped to send, they failed to send it. You can't trust crowds.

Indeed, it appears that it's easier to fool a crowd than a person. Where an individual might say, "Wait, that doesn't sound right." A member of a crowd might think, "That can't be as wrong as it sounds, or all these other people wouldn't believe it. It must be true." And this so whether we're talking about a mob in the street or the members of an online community or, for that matter, the New York Stock Exchange. Remember 2008? "Gee, buying securities backed

mostly by shaky mortgages doesn't *sound* like a good plan. But all these other people are making money, and they're very smart. Let's buy some of those." You can't trust crowds.

And yet . . . despite all that I said last year, in this particular case, Jesus kind of did. As the crowds cheer and throw their garments on the road and wave palm branches and sing messianic psalms, some of the Pharisees, showing the same disdain for crowds that I've just expressed, tell him to hush his followers. But Jesus replies, *I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.* The crowds are right to shout. The Pharisees were the smartest, most highly educated scholars of the day, but Jesus clearly says that the crowds know something that the Pharisees don't. (For that matter, so do the rocks.) So what's going on here?

Well, it turns out that there are *some* ways in which crowds are smarter than individuals, even very clever individuals. People have noted this phenomenon at least since Aristotle, and in recent years it has been called "The Wisdom of Crowds." In 1906 a statistician named Francis Galton visited a county fair in England where they were holding a contest to see who could most accurately guess the weight of a bull. Out of curiosity, Galton wrote down all 800 guesses and then averaged them. The median number was the weight of the bull. No one person got it right, and I'm sure some of them were wildly off, but the crowd as a whole nailed it. So, sure, there are problems with crowds, but this story illustrates how in certain circumstances, they are smarter than the individuals that make up the crowd. This is the insight that lies behind such things as Wikipedia, jury trials, and democracy. You see, all of us individuals have our own blind spots, even smartest among us. We are always going to see the world through the lens of our own experience. In a group where there is free and open exchange of ideas, however, each person's blind spots can get filtered out.

Another way this works is over time. Call it the "Wisdom of History." A question that is considered by many people, over many generations, will often sort out the extreme positions and fill in the blind spots. One quick example of this. I am often asked by people, "Who decided which books got put in the Bible? And who made those people the judges?" Usually people ask this because they've just read somewhere that there were some books, like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary, that did not get included in the New Testament. So why not? There were a lot of factors that were considered by some very smart church leaders, but ultimately those smart people didn't make the decision. Here's who really decided: it was the wisdom of the crowd, over time. The books of our New Testament are the books that the greatest number of churches had found most meaningful in shaping faith over the course of some 250 years.

Let's retrace our steps. So far in this message I've told you that crowds can't be trusted and also that they can be smarter than any one of us individuals. So which is it? Well, both. It turns out that crowds are only smart under certain conditions. As sociologists have studied the wisdom of crowds they have noted that crowds tend to be *least* wise when they are homogeneous. If everyone in a group is like everyone else, from the same class or background, that group does not make good decisions. And they don't even realize it, because they all think along the same lines. A wise crowd is a diverse crowd, with multiple perspectives. Second, the crowd has to encourage open communication. It doesn't help to have multiple perspectives if people with minority perspectives are afraid to speak them. But where you have a group that includes a wide range of perspectives and people who feel free to express them, that crowd should be listened to.

So why have I spent so much time on this sociological concept? Because learning what humans are like and how we work best can teach us something about our Creator, and the purpose that Creator had for us. From our thoughts today we can see a few things. First, we were made to be in community with others. Individuals are great, and individual achievement is admirable, but none of us are complete by ourselves. In community, our individual weaknesses are strengthened and our individual blind spots are corrected. Second, the community that God designed us for is a diverse community. Being in a group of people who all share the same perspective doesn't correct our individual faults; it encourages them. So, if we need each other, and especially need those who are different from us, our task should be to build bridges of trust that allow different perspectives to be spoken.

That's a lot to think about in our last few minutes, so I won't try to tackle all of it. Let me just return to the first lesson: we were made to live in community. If you had ever doubted that, the past year should be enough to answer those doubts. Since the first pandemic shut-down, we have learned how much we need each other. We have discovered how much we miss those we have been separated from, and we have learned to appreciate more than ever the few people that have made up our restricted communities. Some of us have discovered new communities – online, mostly – to replace at least some of what we've been missing, and many of us have realized how drab life can be without a wide variety of perspectives in our lives. We need each other.

The pandemic has also changed how I think of church. I have been used to thinking of the Coffee Fellowship time and other social activities as fringe benefits of the church, but not like those things that are *really* important like worship and education and mission work and, you know, sermons. I was wrong. The community is central. We are here to show God's love, and we do that through community. That's how we practice love and trust and respect for others. Without community, we may be a fine organization, but we're not the Church of Jesus Christ. So, as we plan for our coming return to in-person worship – as of last Monday's council meeting, the target date is June 13 – we need to think not just in terms of how we can return, but how we can apply what this past year has taught us. How can we put community in its rightful position? How can we extend that community to all? How can we make it apparent as soon as people walk in our doors? How can we truly be a community of diverse voices?

So, back to the streets of Jerusalem. Within the context of Judaism, that was a relatively diverse crowd, people from all over gathered for the Passover. There were city people, provincials from Galilee, ex-patriate Jews from Egypt and Syria, rich people and poor people, educated and not-so-much, but that day they shared a sense that Jesus was different, something worth celebrating. Sometimes the crowd is right.