

The Resilience of Being Together
Mark 11.7-10 / Psalm 118
March 28, 2021, Palm Sunday
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We have been talking about “resilience” during Lent – the resilience that comes with being prepared; of having nothing left to lose; the resilience of purpose and gratitude, forgiveness and joy. And this Palm Sunday, “the resilience of being together.”

It may be a little painful to talk about “the resilience of being together” when, for over a year, we haven’t been. Perhaps if there is one thing this pandemic has taught us is that we should never take being together for granted again.

As many of you know, my dad was a pastor. And when attendance at church started getting a little low, he loved to quote Hebrews 10.25 (from the King James Version, of course): “do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is, ...” which always sounded like a threat. Something bad would happen if you didn’t show up. It wasn’t very motivating, especially since it was being said to those of us who actually *had* shown up.

It is true that we have found ways to be together over the last year. And I’m so grateful for all those that have made our online gatherings possible – Kellie and Katie and Cherry and Ben and David and Pastor Anita and Pastor Patricia and singers and musicians and all the leaders and all of you who had to learn that foreign language we call “technology.”

One of the things we have learned is that there are some benefits to meeting online – no traffic, some deep conversations we may not have had otherwise, getting to connect faces and names, staying in touch with our extended family who are far away. You can be sure that, even when we *can* be together again in the same space, these online gatherings will continue.

Because: Never underestimate the power of showing up. I think that’s what my dad meant to say.

It’s hard to talk about Palm Sunday without talking about a crowd.

And I am wondering what we have learned about crowds in the absence of any. Some of you know I am a fan of football and basketball. Lent is important. But it is the season of March Madness at our house. And I can tell you, even watching those games from the comfort of my own home, they are not the same without the crowd. There is nothing like the energy that can be generated by a stadium full of passionate fans.

I read an article earlier this year trying to explain why President Trump and Evangelical mega-church pastors were so insistent on continuing to meet – even when some of those pastors and their people got sick and died. The author claims that it wasn't for political or religious reasons alone. It was for a very practical reason – the energy generated by the crowd was their lifeline to power. Take the crowd away and people might start thinking for themselves. Take the crowd away and people might stray without that emotional fix of hundreds of people chanting or cheering or singing together. Take the crowd away and people might begin to see behind the hype.

Now, for a long time, I have dismissed crowds as irrelevant to anything that really matters. I would self-righteously quote the words of Jesus in Matthew 18 that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Who needs a crowd?

But, in the absence of them, I feel like I'm missing something.

It's not exactly true that I have not been in any crowds during this pandemic time. I did participate in a protest of police violence against people generally, and people of color in particular, on Capitol Hill.

And I spent several hours at the playfield in Judkins Park for a Black Lives Matter gathering. Laura Van Tosh and I double-masked and joined a silent march of thousands of Seattleites. The power of being together in silence was breathtaking

Both of those experiences of the crowd ignited something in me that was different from the energy I get in conversations with two or three – no matter how passionate the discussions are.

And I have to remember – especially today – that the story of Palm Sunday is set in the context of Jewish tradition where you were expected to be part of crowd on pilgrimage to Jerusalem at some point, singing the Psalms together as you make your ascent up to the city, like this Psalm 118. You might have been in a crowd somewhere that sang Psalm 118.24: “This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.”

Dr. Michael Raschko of Seattle University says that the story of Palm Sunday in Mark 11 is a commentary on Psalm 118.25-29:

Save us, [that's "Hosanna"] save us we beseech you, O God!

O God, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God.

We bless you from the house of God.

The Holy One is God and has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;

You are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to God, for God is good,

God's steadfast love endures forever

It's probably easy to imagine the energy of being together in a crowd as they sing these words. The wisdom of the Jewish tradition is that the seeds of resilience can be found in moments like this.

Even when we can't be part of them, crowds matter.

And Dr. Raschko says that the use of Psalm 118 in Mark's telling of the Palm Sunday story has two parts:

The people – the crowd – shout blessings to celebrate the coming of the kingdom of David ... [and] this triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the time of the Passover would have been enough to put the Roman authorities on their guard. The Romans viewed any assertion of local authority without their approval as an early sign of revolution.

So this Palm Sunday crowd is involved in two things simultaneously: (1) blessing and *celebration* – “blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God; blessings from the house of God” and (2) *provocation* that puts the powers that be on notice – that's the “Hosanna!” part – “save us,” the crowd shouts, from this oppression and injustice.

It makes me think about those two crowds I was part of in these pandemic days on Capitol Hill and Judkins Park. On Capitol Hill, there was a lot of provocation. But attempts at celebration – there were some – got lost. In Judkins Park, the celebration of the value of Black lives was itself, even in silence, a kind of solid, quiet provocation of those powers that would try to out-shout, dismiss, disregard, and kill Black folks.

Sometimes all it takes to be provocative is to celebrate something revolutionary – like Black lives matter and love wins and the audacity of hope.

If I think about the Palm Sunday crowds at church, they tend to be heavy on celebration and very short on provocation.

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey says that, for many Christians, Palm Sunday is a “mini-Easter, a get-out-of-Lent-free day.” But, she says:

... the crowd that encircled Jesus in the last week of his life did not know where the story was going. They only knew that the one who came in the name of the Lord was becoming a dangerous character to associate with by the next morning. It was all well and good when he was spending his days healing the sick and teaching in parables, but his presence and message in Jerusalem quickly became a serious threat to the powers that be. By week's end, even his closest disciples made themselves scarce.

Maybe our Palm Sunday crowds, when they can gather again, could use a little less celebrating and a little more provoking of the powers that be.

This week I found myself thinking about another crowd. It was the Women's March on January 21, 2017. Some of you were there. It was reported to be the largest protest march in Seattle's

history and I loved seeing that great crowd of joyful, proud, creative, powerful women. It was a celebration of women and it couldn't help but be a provocation of patriarchy, challenging a president and a system that demeans, devalues, and daily harbors violence against women. That was the beginning.

And then there was September 2018 and the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford in the confirmation hearings about Brett Kavanaugh. Once again, a grinning, whining, hysterical, victimizing man tried to claim his own victimhood. We could see it playing out on national television. And the "Me Too" movement called together a great crowd of witnesses to testify against the violence and abuse of women.

By the spring of 2019, our choir was getting ready for its Spring Concert. They did so against this backdrop of systemic racism, the dehumanizing impact of patriarchy, and the free reign of economic greed. What is there to sing? Well, our Music Minister, Ben Luedcke, chose a piece that begins and ends with:

*I raise my voice, I give my word
I raise my voice, until I'm heard
I will not cease, too many hearts are broken
Stay until my words are spoken
One hundred, one thousand, one million voices.*

Listen!

[Anthem from 2019: "On Million Voices."]

Today, beloved ones, if you hear that voice, *be* that voice. Do not harden your hearts. From right there in your own home, join that Palm Sunday crowd of voices committed to celebration and provocation. Because, remember, "blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God," the God of love and justice.

NOTES

I have tried to re-locate this article and there are several related to the "Psychology of Crowds." But I have yet to find this particular article. Michael B. Raschko, *A Companion to the Gospel of Mark* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), p.120. Katherine Willis Pershey, "Living the Word," *Christian Century*, March 10, 2021, p.20. *One Million Voices* by Brian Tate; "It was inspired by the courage of individuals who are willing to take risks to come forward, speak their truths, and stand up for human rights."