

Palm Sunday: The Way of The Crowd

Luke 19:28-49

A Sermon Preached by Amy M. Roon

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In preparing for this sermon, Peter informed me of that some of you might be familiar with Crossan and Borg's work on this scripture. Contrasting the images of two parades, a Roman procession of military might led by the governor and a full cavalry; with the peaceful, possibly satirical parade of a community activist on a donkey surrounded by flower-power followers waving fronds brought from home.

It's a fascinating distinction between two very different styles of leadership and messages. Unfortunately, when Crossan and Borg published their book including their work comparing these "Two Parades", I was working two jobs and barely keeping up with my weekly sermons at Lummi. So I'm late to the game on this one. *I've* always been struck not by the character of Jesus in this narrative, (or by comparison, the unspoken character of Pontius Pilate) but by the characters of the disciples and the crowd. When asked to compare the two parades, I'm struck more by the similarities of the crowds than of the differences of their leaders. Both leaders, after all, are using tried and true leadership rallying techniques.

We're curious and social creatures. We like to cheer. We like to feel part of something bigger than ourselves and most of us enjoy a parade. That Rome would use this tool to bolster the local authorities and intimidate possible dissidents is actually not that different than what the other parade was doing...to bolster the love and joy mongers and make it clear that those who disagree with their message of Jesus joy have no power over them:

"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, ... Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'"

When I was younger I might have dared imagine the story from the perspective of the rider on the donkey, people shouting and cheering me on; or at least as one of the two disciples chosen to go *get* the donkey. I might have been leading the donkey, leading the way, if not the leader myself. As I've gotten older I've slipped further and further into the crowd. Now I imagine myself as a mom who's strapped her baby on her back so she could go and catch a glimpse of the parade passing by. I'm excited to be a part of something bigger than my everyday life but the shouting makes me a bit self-conscious. I'm looking around to see if I know anyone. Someone hands me a palm to wave, smiling cheerfully and encouragingly. I give it a bit of a wave, still feeling a bit awkward; not sure if I'm ready to shout myself.

The last big rally I was in was in San Francisco during the largest coordinated worldwide anti-war protest in history. I remember being nervous about going. I knew that nearly everyone I knew from seminary was planning to go but hadn't been able to coordinate with any of them. I had to go to church first, First Baptist Alameda...where we had been instructed by the Senior Pastor that we weren't to talk about the war build up at church because it was too controversial... I made it plain where I was going *after* church and mentioned that if anyone wanted to come we could go together. I wasn't really trying to change anyone's politics. I just didn't like the idea of having to go by myself.

Big crowds make me shy and uncomfortable. I'm self-conscious and unsure of whether I'm in the right place at the right time...are we "marching"? Where are we marching from? Where's the beginning of the line? Are we chanting now? Wait! What was that? "Not our game?" Oh! Oh! "Not in our NAME!" Got it...oh, nobody else is chanting now... I wish I had a sign...

Some of the signs were, I thought, hilariously disparaging commentaries on the Bush administration; although recent demonstrations against the Obama administration have made me

examine more critically how those signs might have been viewed by someone who didn't find them so hilarious.

As I reflect on who I am within the crowd I am aware that I have both the capabilities of finding or generating the energy within it and the capability to be shut down by it. I am struck by how tempting it can be to get caught up in the energy of the crowd without examining whether that energy is being used for a more just peace or for unjust condemnation. I am left wondering how many of the Jerusalem leaders sincerely thought that Pilate's Parade was for the good of the order; at how the Pharisees' request to kindly shush may not have been out of malice or discouragement but out of concern. It's easy to get turned around within the crowd, to not be sure where you're going. Maybe you left your house to attend the Jesus parade but somehow got swept up with the Pilate crowd.

I really don't know what has concerned me more about the demonstrations these past weeks. It seems awfully strange to be contrasting Empire with Jesus amidst feelings of concern for elected officials of the majority party... I'm disturbed by the way the Tea Party protesters claim the role of the disenfranchised and then spit on elected officials and call them names. I am greatly disturbed by the way the power of the crowd is being manipulated. I am greatly disturbed by the way that all leaders in this country seem to invoke Jesus' name and resist any association with Pontius Pilate when I *know* this is just not true.

In the midst of the crowd I cannot see the man on the donkey, I can only see those who ride on tall horses. In the midst of the crowd I cannot always tell if this is a disciple urging me to join her or a rabble-rouser intent on using intimidation for selfish aims? Sometimes the invitation to Pilate's parade can sound remarkably similar to the invitation to join Jesus' crowd.

As an onlooker both parades would have held some level of excitement and drama for me. What made Jesus' parade different was not necessarily the people who attended but how he and his disciples led them to behave and what they asked them to cheer *for*.

I *want* to hang with the Jesus parade. I want to say that I know what the Jesus parade looks and feels like. And here's what I've noticed. When I'm cheering for Jesus I usually find that I'm surrounded by people who are as excited about cheering as they are about singing. I usually don't have to look very hard to find a kind and hope-filled face. The difference between these two parades is not just who the parade *participants* were but what they asked of the crowd. One asked for submission. The other asked for participation. One asked the crowd to join in a collusion of threats. The other asked the crowd to join in a song.

I want to follow the Jesus Way. I want to be in the crowd that sings praise. Whose rallying cry is Hosanna and whose call to action is to love. If my fellow marchers are calling for harm to others? I am in the wrong parade.

We don't just wave fronds and palms and greenery on this Sunday because it's "That time of year again." We do it to remind us what it feels like to be in the Jesus parade. We do it to help our children know the difference between the two crowds so that they will know how to distinguish the rally cry of love from the rally cry of hate. We do it to practice being a crowd together, so that we will know and remember how to make holy noise together. We cannot cede the power of the crowd to those with a hurtful agenda. We cannot allow our voices to weaken with disuse so that our rally cry for love can no longer be heard over shouts of anger.

Brothers and Sisters, followers of the Jesus Way, any one of us can get lost in the crowd. And any one of us has the power to give the rally cry to call one another home. Our rally cry is our covenant with one another and with God:

*"To promote Your reign of justice and peace, meeting hate with reconciling love;
and To reject the false gods of society, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. "*

Sisters and Brothers of the Jesus Way, we are called *this* day to join in Great Congregation with the Cloud of Witnesses to justice and peace that have come before. To respond to the rallying cry of love and risk being loud and noisy for the One who comes in the name of the Lord! To sing loud praises of peace, We Are Called. I want to hear you say it: We Are Called. I want to know that you will risk waving your arms as an echo of that crowd from so long ago...let me see that crowd alive here in this congregation.

We Are Called.

To promote
Your reign
of justice and peace,
meeting hate
with reconciling love;
To reject
the false gods of society,
proclaiming
the gospel of Jesus.

May God help us
and be with us.
Hosanna! Amen.