

“Fear Not the Crowds”  
 Mark 11:27-33  
 A Sermon Preached by The Rev. Douglas M. Donley  
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 University Baptist Church  
 Minneapolis, MN

Throughout the Lenten Season, we have looked at the constant Biblical admonition to Fear Not. Fear not is a word on Jesus’ lips and it ought to be on ours as we figure out how to be faithful witnesses to the workings of God these days. We have already looked at fear that comes from the wilderness, our secrets, scarcity and storms. Next week we’ll look at the fear of coming into our own as children of the promise. On Easter, we’ll consider the empty tomb.

The title of this sermon is Fear not the crowds. We know the crowds can change from being peaceful to being violent.

Witness Minneapolis in late May and early June.

Witness Washington DC in early January.

Witness how crowds waved palm branches and hailed Jesus as Messiah and within a week, shouted “crucify him”.

Crowds can be dangerous. The chief priests tried to keep the crowds silent on Palm Sunday, but Jesus rightly said that if they tried to silence the crowds, the very stones would cry out. Which is another way of saying that the foundation of the City-State is hungering for something better.

Another word for a crowd is a mob.

Crowds and mobs are kissin’ cousins.

How does a crowd differ from a mob? A mob is a term given by the opposition. And it often comes when the crowd turns violent. When it has crossed the peace line. It becomes something to fear.

Walter Rauschenbush wrote way back in 1917 about mob mentality and its threat to right thinking:

“The mob spirit is the social spirit gone mad. The social group then escapes from the control of its wiser and fairer habits, and is lashed into action by primitive passions. The social spirit reacts so powerfully on individuals, that when once the restraints of self-criticism and self-control are shot back, the crowd gets drunk on the mere effluvia of its own emotions. We know only too well that a city of respectable and religious people will do fiendish acts of cruelty.

There are radical mobs and conservative mobs. Well-dressed mobs are more dangerous than ragged mobs because they are far more efficient. Entire nations may come under the mob spirit, and abdicate their judgment.

Rarely are mobs wholly spontaneous; usually there is leadership to fanaticize the masses. At this point this sin connects with the sins of selfish leadership... Sometimes the crowd turns against oligarchy; usually the oligarchy manipulates the crowd.” (*A Theology for a Social Gospel*, 1917: 254)

As I read this passage from Mark’s Gospel, it becomes clear that the Sanhedrin, the leadership of the people, are afraid of the crowds becoming mobs. The chief priests, scribes and elders, are like the Senate, Congress and Supreme Court of the Hebrews. Together they make up

the Sanhedrin or the religious rulers. They are charged not only with leading the religious lives of the people, but to keep the tenuous peace in an occupied state. They do so with the permission of their Roman overlords. They know that if people step out of line, Rome will exercise its power to execute individuals or destroy the temple and its people. By the time Mark's Gospel was written, the Romans had done just that. They had destroyed the temple and sent the Hebrew people into yet another exile. The remnant, trying to make sense of it all, put the blame on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership. Like King Hezekiah of old, the problem was not the evilness of Rome or Babylon, but the faithlessness of the people.

So, Mark spins his narrative, pointing out the complicity of the Sanhedrin. The question turns on authority. John the Baptist has been killed by Herod, showing them what happens when a religious leader gets too audacious. The State will silence them. In this case it was the occupying force that killed him. But the religious leadership did not really stand up for John or even demand that Herod be held accountable. Mark saw this as the Sanhedrin being complicit with Rome against the more revolutionary aspects of the Jewish collective life.

So Mark has the chief priests, the scribes and the elders confront Jesus about his so-called authority. The chief priests, scribes and elders sought to discredit Jesus. They were the ones who had authority and Jesus needed their permission to do his preaching. So they asked him by what authority he was doing these things and who gave him this authority. Authority is mentioned six times in this seven-verse scripture reading. Authority is in their hands. They had the power to sanction or condemn Jesus.

It's no accident that today's scripture opens with the passage comes after the turning over of the tables. That's the these things authority that the Sanhedrin is questioning.

Jesus had made a public relations nightmare for those in "authority." It was well and fine to do his miracles and tell his enigmatic stories in the hinterlands. But here he is in Jerusalem. Their turf. Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, hailed as a military leader. Then he turns over the tables of the moneychangers, invoking the prophet Jeremiah who said, "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves." The chief priests, scribes and elders conferred and decided to assert their authority. It was their job to hold the tenuous peace. There can be no protests without permission. And only they had authority to grant such permission.

Jesus, we can imagine listened to their question about whose authority. It was a trap question—a losing proposition. So, Jesus took a breath and went on the offensive.

Jesus answered them by asking a question of his own. People generally get annoyed when one responds to a question with a question. It upsets the order of things. It shifts the power in the relationship. It turns over the tables of the thought police.

Jesus said 'answer me a question and I'll tell you by whose authority I do these things.'

Jesus invoked the name of John the Baptist. "Did John's baptismal practice come from heaven or did it have human origin?" Implied in the question is their own sense of authority. Did John do holy work, or was he a madman who manipulated the crowds. If he was a madman, he could be dismissed. If he was doing holy work, why was he not endorsed by the religious leadership?

The Sanhedrin is afraid of the crowds—which is another way of saying popular opinion. Both John the dead prophet and Jesus the living prophet are a threat to order. The leadership is politically isolated. They fear the people they supposedly serve.

Jesus loved turning the question on his interrogators. He loved this more than he liked answering the questions. He made his questioners think, not simply to regurgitate the answers.

Jesus was very interested in showing people a new way to look at the world. He wanted people to think. He wanted to also have them take off the masks that we can't help but wear, being children of our upbringing, in a society that is dependent on the illusion of peace.

The chief priests, scribes and elders conferred with one another and said, 'we don't know.' No Comment, I will neither affirm nor deny. Jesus looks at them and essentially walks away. Jesus doesn't recognize their authority. They are afraid of the crowds, Jesus knows there's a more important battle to fight.

Fear not the crowds.

There are crowds that can be redemptive and crowds that can easily turn malicious.

I think of the crowds that watched lynchings, the crowds that stormed the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

I think of the crowds that marched in peaceful protest across the Civil Rights era.

I think of the millions who marched across the world in 2003 trying to keep the war from starting in Iraq.

I think of Malcom X's transformation that happened when he went on the Hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca with Muslims from around the world. Something about that interracial unity changed him.

I think of choral singing and the power that we experience when we gather with those around us and lift up our voices, proving that many voices united can make something beautiful.

I think of the violence that can break out when rage meets rage.

Crowds of people are in the Minneapolis streets as the Chauvin trial ramps up. Most are peaceful. Many are angry. Many are provocative. You can feel the tension in the air. The barricades protecting property as people give voice to their long-squelched feelings of anguish and hope.

Next week is Holy Week. And we will face with the same choices as previous generations. Of what crowd will we be a part? The disciples were a crowd that dispersed when the mob took over. But that crowd regrouped and became the church of Jesus Christ. That coming together is evidence of the resurrection and also that the mob does not have the final say.

The church's role is to not be a mob, but to be a movement. Political and even religious leaders fear a movement, for it upsets the power balance.

The Sanhedrin should fear the crowd.

Jesus was saying, be a part of not a mob, but a movement. You may be called a mob by your accusers.

Your protest might be called a riot.

But if you have truth on your side, morality on your side, justice on your side then there's a good chance you have God on your side too.

So, become a part of the right crowd.

For we need your voice.

The sermon closed with the singing of "One Voice in the Crowd" by Judy Small

*I've lived a life of privilege, I've never known what hunger is  
I've never labored with my hands except to play guitar  
Middle class my middle name, life's been more or less a game  
But in the end it's all the same, the buck stops where you are*

*Chorus:*

*And we are foolish people who do nothing  
Because we know how little one person can do  
Yes we are foolish people who do nothing  
Because we know how little one can do.*

*It's not my issue not my scene, I've got to get my own house clean  
I keep it neat and tidy just in case the queen should call  
Come back to me another day, and gladly I'll join in we say  
And I'm just one voice anyway, just one brick in the wall*

*Bridge:*

*One brick in the wall you may be one voice in the crowd  
But without you we are weaker and our song may not be heard  
One drop in the ocean but each drop swell the tide  
So be a one brick in the wall  
Be one voice in the crowd*

*Chorus*