

## ***Sunday Morning Reflection***

***April 5, 2020 – Palm Sunday***

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### ***Crowds: The Faithful and The Fickle***

#### **Scripture Passage – [Matthew 21:1-11](#)**

There are many things that I knew I would miss once social isolation and physical distancing became the norm for life's activities. I knew that I would miss worship, fellowship meals, and visiting with all of you. I knew that I would miss letting people pet Cicero and Willow when I run them in the morning or walk them in the evening. While I was walking them last week a little girl asked with glee in her eyes if she could pet Cicero and Willow, and I had to tell her no right as her mother began to tell her no as well. The little girl began to cry and turned her face into her mother's side declaring that she, "hated this stupid virus!" Broke my heart! I knew that I would miss going to Nicholas' adult league soccer matches and that I would really miss attending Christopher's commencement ceremony and just simply relishing in his (and our) accomplishment.

But there is one thing that I never thought I would miss, and that is crowds. Oh, it's not because I have had bad experiences with crowds. I have never been the victim of a crowd's stampede or the victim of any kind of crowd mentality. I just never thought that I liked crowds. I like the beach much more when I have it mostly to myself and I certainly like planes that are not very crowded. I do enjoy the noise of crowds during sporting events, but I don't like "tussling" with crowds to get out of the stadium and to my car!

I guess, as I think about it a little more, I have had some good experiences with crowds. I can remember like it was yesterday, being at Gene Sack's house with all of the guys from High School hockey team. We were watching the 1980 Team USA versus Soviet Union (The Red Army) hockey game. I can remember counting down the final seconds and jumping up and down while going crazy. I can still remember Al Michaels making his

now iconic statement; “Do you believe in miracles?” The “Miracle on Ice” had happened and you could feel the energy of the crowd in the arena and in our coach’s home.

I must admit that when Christopher and I went to the Neil Young concert in the summer of 2016, at Red Rocks Amphitheater in Denver, Colorado, that I really enjoyed that crowd. It was a surreal experience to sit with Christopher at a Neil Young concert pondering how I was his age when I went to my first Neil Young concert. I can recall looking around at the crowd and realizing there were other groupings just like Christopher and me. There were a lot of men in their 50’s and some even in their 70’s, who were with children and grandchildren. I shared knowing glances and nods with many of them, as I am sure we were sharing the same surreal thoughts! (By the way, Susan and I also went to a Neil Young concert at Red Rocks Amphitheater when we were first married and living in Denver!) So, I guess crowds are not all bad.

One of the interesting themes that is present in the gospel of Matthew, is Matthew’s repeated emphasis on the presence of crowds. Redaction criticism is a higher critical methodology that compares and contrasts the same stories in as they appear in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Redaction critics rightly suggest that you can learn a lot about the person and the goals of a writer, by the additions and deletions they make to stories. Matthew adds the presence of “crowds” into stories where Mark and Luke do not even mention their presence. It does not mean that the crowds were not there, it just means that the presence of the crowds is an important theme in Matthew’s gospel so he mentions their presence, where as Mark and Luke do not mention the presence of crowds because it is not important to them.

And so, on several occasions in response to Jesus’ teachings, Matthew tells us that the crowds were amazed by the teaching of Jesus. Matthew also tells us that the crowds were present for many of Jesus’ miracles and it was in some instances the crowds who declared that Jesus must be the Messiah, because he could heal the sick and restore sight to the blind. Matthew even, in a couple of places, adds that the crowds had begun to openly question their religious leaders in response to their time with Jesus.

The crowds... they have an interesting role in Matthew's gospel. The crowds appear to follow Jesus from one village to the next in ancient Palestine. The crowds appear to hang on every word that comes out of Jesus' mouth praising him for his teaching. The crowds witness miracle after miracle and openly declare that Jesus must be the long-awaited Messiah. At times, it's hard to differentiate the crowds from the disciples, because the crowds seem to be so fervent in their commitment to Jesus.

Perhaps, in no other story is the role of the crowds more highlighted than in the story of Palm Sunday. Of course, in the story of Palm Sunday, the disciples are present. It is the disciples who are sent to secure the donkey for Jesus.

But more so than in any other story, the disciples recede into the background of the story as the crowds take center stage. It is a very large crowd, Matthew says, who lay their cloaks on the ground so that Jesus, riding in majesty, does so without even touching the dirt. It is the crowds who cut down palm branches and wave them energetically as Jesus rides by. It is interesting that the waving of palm branches in ancient cultures was how you welcomed Kings when they returned to their capital! The crowds seem to understand what is happening. Jesus, the king of the Jews, is returning to his rightful throne in Jerusalem.

And so as Jesus' procession slowly winds through the streets, it is this large crowd that joyfully shouts...

***"Hosanna<sup>[b]</sup> to the Son of David!"***

***"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"<sup>[c]</sup>***

***"Hosanna<sup>[d]</sup> in the highest heaven!"***

Matthew expands the size of the crowd when he mentions that the whole city of Jerusalem ***"was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?'"*** It is important to note that Matthew does not now, at the climax of the story, have the disciples stepping into center stage to make sure that everyone correctly understands who Jesus is. No! It is the crowds who are given the rare opportunity to be the ones who are privileged to declare to the whole city who this person is who is receiving a king's welcome. The crowds joyfully declare, ***"This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."***

It might be hard for us to understand how rowdy this scene must have been. The Romans often complained regarding how the Jews, like other Arabic people, were very emotional and expressive. Josephus called the Jews at this time “explosively jubilant.” In my mind’s eye, I imagine this scene being something like a Sanders or Trump rally, or better yet. In my mind’s eye and in my heart of hearts, I imagine this scene being like downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul, when we long suffering Minnesota Vikings’ fans finally get to have our ticker-tape parade and witness the Lombardi Trophy being held by our Super Bowl Champion heroes. If I can still walk and see I will be laying my coat down on the road before that bus!

This scene would have been one of incredible joy and hope – and it is the crowds who are the main characters in the story who declare who Jesus is.

But as we all know, the next time that Matthew mentions the crowds in relation to Jesus, the crowds have already been persuaded by the religious authorities to turn on Jesus, and it is the crowds who a few days later, are crying out with passion and conviction, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Although there are many reasons why the crowds turned on Jesus (the most important being because Jesus did not slaughter their Roman enemies and establish his earthly kingdom), I think that the reason why Matthew so carefully crafts a place in his gospel for the crowds is so that he can differentiate between what it means to be a faithful disciple, and what it means to be a fickle crowd-like follower of Jesus.

The crowds seem to be interested in the show and the crowds seem to be interested in what Jesus can do for them. When they see and experience Jesus’ healing power, they praise and follow him. When they see and experience Jesus feeding thousands like themselves, they praise him and follow him. But when Jesus dies on a cross and calls them to pick up their cross and follow him, the crowds turn on Jesus.

The difference between the crowds and the disciples in the gospel of Matthew is not so much focused on who they think Jesus is or even how they respond when Jesus acts, the difference between the crowds and Jesus, is more about what one is willing to do for Jesus. Is one willing to pick up their cross and follow Jesus? Is one willing to serve others and serve Jesus, while being served?