“The Temptation to Follow the Crowd”
Mark 11:1-11
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There is no better feeling than that of being part of a crowd that is stirred up for reasons we agree with, but such feelings are ever short-lived, and crowds, even at their best, are fickle. This we know from personal experience, especially during this would-be sacred season we call March Madness. Yes, the church calendar says it is Lent. In fact, today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. But any preacher in this part of the world who doesn’t attend to the secular calendar in this season is out of touch with reality. Reality says that, no matter how strong our Christian convictions are, what happens on hardwood with a round ball has the potential to become holy, as long as our team wins!

But if our team does not win, and this will be the case for all but one team this year, like every other, the good feeling of the crowd will quickly fade and an attitude of criticism will emerge. Such is the nature of sports, after all, fan is an abbreviation for fanatic, and the very people who are fanatically supportive can become fanatically critical when they do not get what they want. I will never forget my childhood hero Johnny Unitas being booed by his own fans in Baltimore. He led the Colts to comeback victory after comeback victory but all his accomplishments did was raise the bar for fans who were never satisfied.

But such is the nature of sports fanaticism and such is the nature of crowd behavior in general. Whether at a ballgame, in the world of politics or in the realm of religious life, crowds can be full of energy and enthusiasm, but the energy and enthusiasm are usually short-lived, and the crowds themselves are fickle, quick to turn from supportive to critical when expectations are not met.

At this point the sacred and secular calendars intersect. For Jesus knows all about crowds, what their enthusiasm means and what it does not. According to the part of the sacred story we remember today, Jesus enters Jerusalem to a hero’s welcome. “Hosanna!” the people shout,
and, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Cloaks are spread on the road, palm branches are cut. The crowd is stirred up so much that you would think the lights just went down at PNC Arena or the Smith Center or Cameron Indoor Stadium, and the announcer has started to introduce the starting lineups!

But Jesus knows that there is a game yet to be played. He knows what the crowd expects, what he is willing to offer, and thus how things are likely to end. He knows the enthusiasm will be short-lived and the crowd’s loyalty will be tested. So, while he accepts the festive welcome, he is not confused about what it means. He may be tempted to give in completely to the crowd feeling but he does not. In the process, he provides an example for how we might confront our temptation to follow the crowd.

Before we examine Jesus’ example, though, we need to understand what this crowd wants. At first glance, it may appear that people gather with no agenda other than to provide a hero’s welcome for a rabbi they have come to love, but crowds are seldom pure in motivation. Even the crowds that Jesus teaches come with many types of hunger, and because he sees each hunger as a legitimate human need, Jesus feeds the crowds bread and fish before he feeds them spiritually. So, Jesus is willing to engage crowds of people at the point of their varied needs and motivations. But he is not willing to give people whatever they demand.

What is it that the Palm Sunday crowd wants? The answer lies in a misunderstood word – hosanna. We think of it as a shout of praise. Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna, praise God, shout to God in thanksgiving for the one who comes! But this is not what hosanna means. It is not a shout of praise but a plea for help. It means, “Save now!” In other words, according to this story, as Jesus enters the city, people welcome him with their cloaks and palms and shout “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” and as they do they scream, “Save us now! Save us, Jesus!”

And to be clear, they are not talking about spiritual salvation. They are not talking about atonement for sin. They are not talking about being saved from sin by blood shed on a cross. They are talking about
being saved from their bondage to foreign oppression and the attendant issues of poverty. They are talking about political, social and economic freedom, all of which represent genuine human needs and divine concerns, but none of which Jesus plans to provide overnight.

So, right from the very beginning of this week, the writing is on the wall. Crowds of people want something specific that Jesus is not going to provide. They may not boo him outright when he fails to deliver but nor will they risk their necks for him. He may be tempted to give in to their demands but he will not because doing so, no matter how attractive it may seem, would mean straying from his path.

Such is ever the case with this business of following the crowd. Crowds are not good or evil in and of themselves. Sometimes it is fine to go along. Problems arise when the crowds try to pull us somewhere we do not need to go. Inevitably the path has something alluring about it, something to attract us to it. Otherwise, we would not be tempted. But if we follow the crowd just because the crowd is going, we may lose something of our soul along the way as well as our sense of direction.

For this very reason we caution our children against following the crowd. How many times do parents hear some request to allow a child to stay out later or buy some new gadget or dress a certain way with the attached claim – everybody I know has one, all of my friends’ parents let them, everyone is wearing one? Words like everybody, all and everyone are parents’ first clue that the game is afoot and we are being played.

Rarely is it the case that everyone does anything, but even when it is, our plea is that our children think for themselves. The power of peer pressure is strong, human beings need community, but community which shuts down individual choice is unhealthy. Hence the parental admonition – if all of your friends decide to jump off a cliff, are you going to follow them? We hope not. We pray not!

Yet this business of being tempted to follow the crowd follows us into adulthood. We think we need a certain kind of car because a neighbor or friend has one, we think a certain behavior is “O.K.” because someone else does it, we think we have to have a… because everyone else seems to have one.
I will never forget a conversation I had with a third partner my friend and I had in the athletic store we owned in Louisville. He said we were going to skim 10% of our sales. “This way, we won’t have to pay any taxes on this percentage and we’ll pay less to the mall. We’ll hold back 10%. Everybody does it.”

Without a pause, I replied, “I don’t believe everybody does it, but if they do, we are going to be the first business not to. We are not following the crowd on this one. We will not be skimming any money!” And we did not skim nor did we keep this business partner for long. I did not mean to be overly pious or self-righteous. I just wasn’t going to be dragged down a dangerous, unethical and illegal path because of the blind assurance that everybody was doing it.

The temptation to follow the crowd can be strong when we are children and teenagers and even when we are adults. In fact, this temptation can apply to our shared life in the church as well. And again, as with all temptation, the dynamic may seem harmless, perhaps even advantageous. It is wise to be informed about what other churches are doing. We want to stay up to speed as to what is working in other places and there are many things we can learn. But to follow along blindly with what others say “works” or is “successful” without reflecting upon our context, values and mission is neither wise nor faithful.

There are a number of things other churches are doing in the way of worship, education, missions and evangelism that may produce numbers that look good, but just because they work somewhere else doesn’t mean they will work here. One size does not fit all. Furthermore, numbers alone are a poor judge of faithfulness.

The ancient philosopher Diogenes once said, “Discourse on virtue and they pass by in droves. Whistle and dance the shimmy and you’ve got a crowd.” Jesus was not opposed to gathering a crowd but he did refuse to whistle and dance to get one. We know this, but it is tempting to follow along with whatever works because numbers are intoxicating. Any preacher or deacon who says he/she doesn’t care how many people come to any gathering is not telling the truth.
So, crowds want what they want and we are tempted to give in and follow. How do we resist? Well, how does Jesus resist the demands of the Palm Sunday crowd? The answer is pretty simple, but it is not easy. Jesus acts out of an internal sense of who he is and what he discerns God’s calling to be. He is not insensitive to the needs and wishes of others. He just never loses sight of his identity and calling. If a crowd yearns for something he is called to be and do, fine. He feeds the hungry, heals the sick and welcomes the outcast.

But if a crowd demands something outside the box, he says no: no violent overthrow of the oppressor, no revenge for wrong, no miraculous display of power; simply love and acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation, the humble laying down of life. Jesus confronts the temptation to follow the crowd with his internal sense of purpose and remains faithful to his calling.

There is, however, one footnote here – faithfulness provides no guarantee of success as we measure it or wellbeing in this life. Where does Jesus’ internal sense of direction lead him? Not to health, wealth and success but to a painful and humiliating death. There are no guarantees save the guarantees of faithfulness, integrity and authenticity.

So what does this mean for us? It means the more we know who we are and the clearer we are about God’s purpose for our lives, the better prepared we will be to resist temptation. As a church this is what our visioning process is about. We’re trying to develop a shared sense of who we are and what we believe God is calling us to do in this time of much challenge and opportunity. As individuals we benefit from a similar self-awareness and sense of calling. This does not mean we will always act out of our convictions. Sometimes, even when we want to act independently, we may give in to the group mentality. But if we are intent upon following our own path, even when we do, we can grow.

In his book *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* David Whyte tells a story about a young manager. He was pondering an upcoming board meeting. He knew the CEO would ask everyone to rate his newest idea on a 1-10 scale and that everyone would say, “10, great, what a wonderful idea!” He thought the idea was a 1 but didn’t know if he had the courage to go against the
crowd, speak his mind, and thus help the company and become a strong leader in the process. The time for the meeting came and the CEO asked for feedback on his idea. Everyone said “10!” until our friend was asked to weigh in, and after an anxious pause, he said, “Umm, 10.”

In the moment he was devastated. He wanted to roar like a lion but squeaked like a mouse. He wanted to speak his mind but caved in to the crowd. Yet, according to Whyte, because he was committed to his path, this manager learned from this experience and grew into a strong leader. The fact that he knew what it was like to squeak like a mouse helped him later to roar in a way that did not frighten others away.

So it goes with our yearning to act out of an internal sense of identity, calling and direction in many different arenas of life. There are many pushes and pulls from peers and colleagues and various media advertisements to be and do many different things. Sometimes we will simply follow the crowd, no matter how much we yearn for independent thought and action, but even when we do, we can learn and grow in our commitment to self-differentiate, to act out of our own internal sense of direction and thus overcome the temptation to follow the crowd.

So, the season of March Madness continues. Hopefully we can keep things in perspective, win or lose. It is, after all, just a game. More importantly, the season of Lent continues. In fact, we are entering Holy Week, the most holy week of all. And make no mistake, this is no game. It is a life and death situation, and not just for Jesus, but for each of us, as we face an array of choices with enduring consequences.

There will be times when we are surrounded by a crowd, and sometimes the crowd will stir us up in good ways, encourage us. Other times the crowd will have its own agenda that does not serve us well.

So, when we find ourselves surrounded by a clamor of voices all urging us on, we are wise to keep our heads and examine our hearts and follow our own course, as we recall that while a crowd welcomes Jesus into town, another crowd stands ready to have him nailed to a cross, and strangely enough when that happens, neither crowd is anywhere to be found.