

Cheering and Jeering the Crucified [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Matthew 21:1—11; Matthew 27:15—23

Once upon a time, in the middle of a crowd, someone's name came up; and I've never forgotten. The name was 'Dick Clark'—and in case you don't know the reference, Dick Clark was the perpetually young host of *American Bandstand* from 1956 until his stroke in 2004. During that time, he was also the master of ceremonies for *New Year's Rockin' Eve*. And in the late 1980's Sheryl and I took the train from Princeton to New York City and there we were, in Times Square, with Dick Clark somewhere above, in a T.V. studio, while we shivered in the cold, waiting for the bedazzling ball to drop. Music blared and the down beats of *Bon Jovi* and *The Doobie Bros* vibrated the air. *We were living on a prayer. Jesus was just alright...* People stood shoulder to shoulder. Their misty exhales in the frigid air caught the sheen of the neon lights. And believe it or not, some folks sipped alcoholic beverages from flasks and plastic cups. Sheryl and I had a thermos of cocoa; and while stomping our feet, trying to stay warm, and watching the clock, all of sudden, the crowd constricted around us. Squeezing and shoving us where we didn't want to go, it felt as if we were in the coils of this massive snake. Apparently, one drunken individual needed to pee, and trying to escape the spray of urine, everybody panicked; and the crowd reconfigured. Just then, however, we observed this clown of a human being climbing on his friend's shoulders; and he was shouting, "Can I have your attention please?" There was a pause, and the hoopla seemed to subside. And then, from his elevated position, the man said, "*Dick Clark is God!*"—and everybody cheered because why else would we be out there in the freezing temperatures being shoved around by the crowd. And then, re-balancing himself, he said, "*No, I was wrong, Dick Clark is the Anti-Christ...*" And everybody jeered!

I wonder if you will believe me this morning if I told you that crowds are fickle. In fact, consider what's happening in Matthew's Gospel, chapters 21 and 27. There are crowds in both chapters and not necessarily the same ones. Crowds reconfigure themselves to suit the occasion; and on Palm Sunday, the occasion involves Jesus arranging for a donkey and colt as his means of entrance into Jerusalem. The text doesn't say that he was tired and didn't feel like walking anymore; it says "***The Lord needs***" these beasts of burden, but we're not sure why. As of verses eight and nine, then, Jesus is still on the road from the Mount of Olives, where the "***crowds went ahead of him***" and "***followed***" him, shouting, "***Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord...***" So, it's clear at least that some in the crowd are true believers. Maybe they've been healed by Jesus, taught by Jesus, called by Jesus—it doesn't matter; these folks are fully on-board with his status as Messiah, God's Anointed. And yet, let's keep going: "***When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'***" In other words, *these* folks are not on-board; they may have been curious, but they're not yet convinced. And, it's interesting to note that the "***crowds***" in verse eleven do not repeat the praises of the crowd in calling Jesus the Son of David. Instead, they "***were saying, 'This is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'***"—which isn't necessarily a complement, given how Nazareth has the reputation for being this really podunk sort of town.

So here's my problem (and I'm hoping it's your problem too):

No matter why or when or where a crowd gathers, Jesus seems unaffected. He doesn't bask in the accolades of Palm Sunday. Nor does he defend himself on Friday when he has the chance before Pilate's judgment seat. Why? Why not take a bow on Sunday when everybody thinks you're the greatest? And why not fight like hell on Friday when everybody thinks you're the lowest? It's a problem... unless it's a solution.

A few years ago, some cyberspace entrepreneurs got together to create this live-stream portal between two different cities, across the Atlantic Ocean from one another. In Dublin, Ireland and in downtown Manhattan, they then set up these massive plasma-screens, each giving a passing glimpse to the other pedestrians, passing by, of what life was like in those very moments.

Anyway, at first, things went very well; and the original intention seemed confirmed: *people from all around the world want to 'get along.'* But then, one day, some in each crowd stopped waving and blowing kisses. A person in New York offered the middle-finger salute for no apparent reason. Then, while cheering, a person in Dublin displayed a picture of the twin towers crumbling to the ground. And instead of connection and empathy, the mentality of the crowd took over; and the cyberspace entrepreneurs abandoned the project and took the plasma screens down. Why? Is it because we don't want to sponsor the callous behavior of the crowd? Or is it because we don't like to see how conflicted and hurtful things can get when we're just trying to get along?

Pay attention: the Crucified Jesus is a portal that shows us the values of Empire on a collision course with the values of God's Kingdom. The Roman occupiers want everybody to pay homage to Caesar—and to make that point as brutally as possible their legions of soldiers ride into Jerusalem on their mighty steeds and their chariots—while Jesus is content with a donkey and a colt. Get the picture? Even today, you and I are being shown image after image of brutality and violence—and people are calling it strength. But maybe not. Maybe the true strength to which we're summoned is that which emanates from the Crucified. Maybe. And I wonder what that means for the life and ministry of a church like this one.

A Ukrainian poet and author of children's books had apparently hid a handwritten manuscript at the foot of a cherry tree. Volodymir Vakulenko did so because the village where he lived had been invaded by Russian soldiers, who were rounding up everybody like him. Meanwhile, after his tragic death, one of the poet's readers, a woman named Viktoria, went to talk with the surviving family and heard about the cherry tree. She went and after digging up the mildewed papers, she published the manuscript under the title, *I Am Transforming*. Russian missiles were then launched to destroy the printing company where the book had been bound; but it was too late. Word got out. In a world where we're either trying to 'get along' or bomb each other's lights out, the word got out.

- ***“Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed”—but word got out.***
- ***“Pilate said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’” But, it’s amazing, isn’t it? Word got out.***

And if you're wondering how the word of ***“Christ and him crucified”*** gets out and makes a difference in the world, I'd say it has nothing to do with how loudly we cheer for him. And I'd also say it has nothing to do with how vehemently we jeer those with whom we disagree. Word gets out when we don't care if the crowd is on our side or not. Word gets out.