

TEXT: Mark 11:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11
THEME: The way of the cross is the way of freedom
SUBJECT: A moral compass
TITLE: The Same Mind

Palm Sunday
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Messiah Moravian
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We Americans take pride in thinking for ourselves. We believe we have the ability to make up our own minds. Yet we are quite capable of ignoring that there is no more conformist message in America than the presumption that we should each make up our minds. When you have a mind you have made up, you have become a card-carrying member of the crowd.

“I can hear the whispers of the crowd; terrors are all around me” cries the Psalmist (Psalm 31:15 NABRE). The crowd, any crowd, is subject to the passions of the moment. Images of students on spring break are sufficient evidence for the seductive lure of the crowd, for how “freedom” is conformity to the ways of the crowd. Remember the 1960’s? “Freedom from” meant “conforming to” the standards of another “crowd.”

During Holy Week, paying attention to the role of the crowd is instructive. At first the crowd seems to support Jesus. We are told the chief priests and scribes even had to refrain from arresting and killing Jesus during the Passover because to do so might cause “a riot among the people.”

But Jesus’ enemies are not deterred. The chief priests know well that crowds are subject to manipulation, and they use this knowledge to their advantage. Thus the same crowds feared by the chief priests on the day Jesus entered Jerusalem will later cry “Crucify him!” Pilate offers to release a criminal, a Passover custom. The crowd chooses Barabbas over Jesus. Pilate, “wishing to satisfy the crowd,” releases Barabbas.

The crowd may be somewhat easy to manipulate, but even petty Roman functionaries know the crowd must be pleased. The more things change . . . How many times have you heard, “The American people want . . .” Politicians, like Pilate, wash their hands of responsibility, bowing to what they believe is the will of the crowd.

Just as the crowd can be manipulated, so can anyone dependent upon the applause of the crowd. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of an admiring public. Anyone so admired cannot help but be tempted and even seduced by the terms of admiration. They may even begin to believe, in spite of appropriate public expression of humility, that they deserve the admiration.

Unable to distinguish who they are from the crowd’s admiration, they soon discover they have become dependent on the expectations of their admirers. They also discover, however, that those expectations continue to increase: demands that must be met if they are to continue receiving the attention they now cannot live without. Fearing the loss of the crowd’s regard, the ones so admired find themselves in a no-win game with no end in sight.

At first, the popularity that comes with the crowd’s attention is pleasing. The admired even worry if they are not being talked about, if their name is not put on a building, if they do not see their

picture or name in print, they can no longer be confident they exist. They fear loss of identity if they are out of the public eye.

On Palm Sunday we remember the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Jesus' popularity with the people has grown throughout his ministry. As he enters Jerusalem the admiring public pave his path with their cloaks and leafy branches. The crowd shouts "Hosanna"—a shout that signals their presumption that Jesus is the long awaited king, the One who has come to restore the glory of King David's empire.

The liturgy for Palm Sunday invites us to take our place with the crowd that identified Jesus as their long-awaited king. Yet as we proceed through Holy Week, as we hear the accounts of Jesus' trial and execution, it becomes increasingly clear that we may have not known what we were doing joining the crowd.

According to Mark, Jesus did not enter Jerusalem so that he might be praised by the crowd. Jesus certainly was not seduced by the crowd's admiration. Why? He had, as we say today, a moral compass. "Jesus, subsisting in God's form, did not deem being on equal terms with God a thing to be grasped" (Hart's translation). He, like the prophet Isaiah, "set his face like flint" to fulfill his mission.

The reading from Philippians describes Jesus as the One who was born in our likeness, even taking the form of a slave. Humbling himself he became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Once Jesus submits to the cup set before him, the enthusiastic crowd will turn away and all his disciples will abandon him. Ironically, the only people who continue to lift him up as king are sadistic soldiers who mockingly make him a crown of thorns.

Jesus is a king who defies what most kings assume they must do if they are to maintain power; that is, they must know how to use the admiration of the crowd to their advantage. Jesus' refusal to take advantage of the crowd's enthusiasm for his own benefit indicates Jesus' power comes not from the crowd, but rather from his obedience to the will of his Father. Followers of Jesus must, like him, resist being seduced by the desires and expectations of the crowd.

The story of Holy Week is the story of betrayal. The crowd betrays Jesus. Judas betrays Jesus. The disciples betray Jesus. Peter betrays Jesus three times. Most chillingly of all is Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus is utterly abandoned, alone.

Our mission as followers of Christ is not to rule, but to be a people capable of witnessing to the One who rules through love, truth, and submission to the Father's will. The author of Philippians says we are to be of the *same mind* as Christ who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Who doesn't prefer power to the vulnerable witness of humility?

Without a moral compass we are not free from exploiting others or from being exploited by the crowd. The moral compass recommended to us is to be of the same mind as Christ. To follow Christ is to deny oneself. It is a slow and difficult task to deny oneself. It is not accomplished once and for all in some dramatic act, but is a continuous way of life that is engaged in daily. It requires lowliness and humility as seen in the life of Jesus.

The strange paradox, the apparent contradiction, is that thinking we are free to make up our own minds only makes us like everyone else—a member of the crowd. Having the same mind as Christ makes us free from the seductions of the crowd, free to negotiate the world with humor and joy. Obedience to the will of the Father, being of the same mind as Christ, leads to holiness of life—the distinctive mark of true individuality and freedom.

(This sermon is indebted to the work of Stanley Hauerwas.)

PRAYER: “Where We Are” by Saint Dorotheos of Gaza (c. 490-c. 560).

We should probably pause,
and discover where we stand and if
we at least stand facing
the most likely direction.
Have we yet left our
fallen city, have we so much
as exited the gate? Have we
cleared the city’s spanning
wreck only to languish
among its rubbish heaps?
Have we made a little
progress, or something more?
Have we progressed
so much as halfway
on our journey,
or just a mile or two?
Have you, like me,
advanced, say, several
miles, and then retraced
the same distance in reverse?
Have we come so far
as the Holy City itself,
the City of Peace?
Have we entered its open
gate, or do we stand
cowering outside, unable
to enter into it?