

***“Cheers and Jeers”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**Palm Sunday**  
**April 9, 2017**

**New Testament Reading: Matthew 21:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” <sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” <sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”



**Sermon: *“Cheers and Jeers”***

Crowd support is often important to success. Ask any athlete and they’ll tell you it’s much easier playing in front of a home town crowd than it is playing in front of hostile fans on the road. The home crowd can buoy your spirits when the game is tough. They can even take an active role in distracting or demoralizing an opponent.

Novelist Pat Conroy was at one time, a basketball player at the Citadel, the state military college of South Carolina. In his book *My Losing Season*, he tells the story of a game his team played at Clemson where, as he stood on the sidelines to inbound the ball, two fans pinched his rear end and two others touched lit cigarettes to the back of his leg. “The crowd,” Conroy wrote, was “not just hostile; they were lunatic in their advocacy of the Tigers.”<sup>1</sup>

That makes that story of the Philadelphia Eagles fans booing and throwing snow balls at Santa Clause during a half-time appearance just ten days before Christmas, 1968<sup>2</sup> seem like child’s play.

Crowd participation matters. Statistics show that teams generally win more games playing at home than they do on the road. Part of that could be attributed to familiarity with the venue, not having to fly cross country to get there and sleeping in one’s own bed the night before the game. But at least part of that success rate can be attributed to the support of the home town fans.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Conroy, Pat. *My Losing Season*. New York, NY: Bantam Dell, 2002. 148. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Mikkelson, David. "Philadelphia Fans Boo Santa Claus." *Snopes.com*. David Mikkelson, 21 Dec. 2011. Web. 10 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/santa/philadelphia.asp>>.

<sup>3</sup> Soniak, Matt. "Is Home Field Advantage Real?" *Mental Floss*. Mental Floss, Inc., 31 Oct. 2013. Web. 10 Apr. 2017. <<http://mentalfloss.com/article/53440/home-field-advantage-real>>.

The impact of crowds can be felt beyond the playing field, too. Shopping around Christmas can be a treacherous endeavor, because of the crowds. Many of our elected representatives avoided hosting town-hall meetings during the most recent congressional recess, out of concern for the crowds who might not be so supportive. When they love you, crowds are a blessing. When they don't...

The cheers of the crowd can turn to jeers in just moments. And though today is Palm Sunday when we normally focus on Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, it is the crowds who followed him that draw our attention today; crowds who were at times both supportive and hostile. It often gets overlooked, but in his gospel, Matthew actually points out the important roll the crowds play in this final week of Jesus' life in several places.

Jerusalem was already a busy city filled with people, but at the time of Passover, it was even more so. Thousands of people have gathered in Jerusalem to worship in the temple and to make sacrifices there to God. It is a mix of the residents of Jerusalem and these religious pilgrims who have gathered by the side of the road to greet Jesus as he comes into Jerusalem. Many of them have laid their cloaks on the ground while others are cutting branches from trees and laying them down for Jesus' donkey to walk over.

In addition to the "very large crowd" along the side of the road, there were also, according to Matthew, crowds traveling before and behind Jesus and it is these people who are shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David!" And while the plot of this story moves on from this loud and raucous celebration, the crowds actually never stop being an important part of the story. And like the crowd at a major sporting event, they give Jesus a distinct advantage... until they turn on him... but we'll get to that in a minute. First, the home crowd advantage.

After Jesus enters Jerusalem, the first place he goes is the Temple.<sup>4</sup> The Temple is the holiest place in all of Israel; it is where God's presence is believed to reside. It is the only place where the Jews can come to truly worship God and offer sacrifices. It is seen not just as a place of worship, but quite literally, God's home. And it is here that Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers, claiming that they have made his Father's house "a den of robbers." And the next day he returns to the temple and begins to teach there. The Chief Priests and the Elders demand to know by what authority Jesus has done these things. Jesus replies with a question about John the Baptist, which the Chief Priests and the Elders are unsure of how to answer. If they choose the wrong answer, they will anger the crowds and Matthew tells us that they "*are afraid of the crowd.*"<sup>5</sup>

Jesus begins to teach in parables and Matthew tells us that "When the Chief Priests and Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them." What did Jesus say? That "the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the Kingdom." For these authorities who believed themselves to be more righteous and more in line with God than anyone else, to be publicly criticized this way was not only offensive but a threat to their authority. Matthew tells us that "They wanted to arrest [Jesus], but [again] *they feared the crowd.*"<sup>6</sup>

For most of the week Jesus teaches in the Temple, speaking out against the Jewish authorities, telling the people to listen to what they teach, since they are experts in the law of Moses, but not to do what they do because they crave honor and privilege and do not seem to know the true meaning of the laws they

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 21:12-17, NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 21:26, NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 21:43-46, NRSV

spend so much time studying and teaching. And finally, his teaching reaches a crescendo as Jesus delivers six condemnations of the Chief Priests and the Pharisees. “Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites!” Cries Jesus; six times he condemns them for their observance of fine details of the law while missing the broader principles of justice and mercy.<sup>7</sup>

And it is at that point that these religious authorities have had enough. And so they begin to plot Jesus’ demise. In chapter 26:3-5, Matthew tells us “Then the Chief Priests and the Elders of the people gathered in the palace of the High Priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.” “But,” they said, “Not during the festival, or there *may be a riot among the people.*”<sup>8</sup> Again, the ever-present crowd lurks silently in the background, preventing the authorities from acting against Jesus.

And when Jesus is finally arrested; when the authorities are finally bold enough to act against him, it is after he has left the city, to go out to the garden at Gethsemane, at night, with just a few disciples with him. The time when he is truly at risk is after he has left the safety of crowds.

But there is one more chance for the crowds to act on Jesus behalf; to serve as protectors and thwart the efforts of the Chief Priests and the Pharisees to bring him down. Matthew tells us that it was the custom during Passover for the Governor “to release a prisoner *for the crowd*, anyone... they wanted.”<sup>9</sup> But here, the crowd asks not for Jesus to be given his freedom, but for another prisoner named Barabbas. Pilate encourages them to reconsider, but they shout all the more loudly for Barabbas. “What should I do with Jesus?” Pilate asks, to which the crowd replies “Let him be crucified!”<sup>10</sup>

Now, I’m reasonably certain that a large amount of carbon dioxide is being expended in churches all over the country this week and next addressing the question of why the same people who cheered for Jesus on Palm Sunday, turned their backs on him just a few days later. And that is a good question. The home field advantage of having the crowd behind him dissipated almost immediately following his arrest. Why?

Well, there are a couple of things to consider. One is the people who laid down their cloaks and cut palm branches; who greeted Jesus with cheers just a few days earlier did so without clearly understanding who he was. Like many people, including many of Jesus’ own inner circle, they probably misunderstood the way Jesus used words like “Prophet” and “Messiah.” When the people heard these words they thought of Elijah, the powerful prophet who slew the prophets of Baal and stood against the house of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.<sup>11</sup> When they heard “Messiah”, they thought of a King of the line of David who would come into power.

Jesus seemed to look the part, standing in the holiest place in Israel and pointing a finger at the religious powers that be and condemning them for their failures. Jesus brazen actions that week in the temple would have been akin to walking onto the 50-yard line at Ohio Stadium and criticizing Woody Hayes. You might have a point but trying to make that point in that place at that time before that audience is sure to rouse more anger against you than anything else. Jesus was in their house pointing out their flaws. In a very real sense, he was *asking* for trouble.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 23:13-36, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 26:5, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 27:15, NRSV

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 27:22, NRSV

<sup>11</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 18:17-40, NRSV

But for the people who were awaiting a Messiah, that show of guts and fearlessness would have been inspiring. But when he allowed himself to get arrested; when he refused to call down legions of angels to defend his reign; when he chastised the one disciple who did try to protect him; when he stood silently before Pilate, he showed himself to be something different. And it is very possible that this lack of any kind of fight and allowing himself to be arrested signaled to the crowds that he was just another false prophet.

Who would they allow to be released? Why *not* Barabbas? As scholar Warren Carter has written, "Pilate offers the crowd a referendum on different forms of resistance. Barabbas is probably a 'bandit' or terrorist. Jesus embraces non-violent resistance."<sup>12</sup>

Could this be the answer? That Jesus turned out to be *not* what the crowd wanted and Barabbas was? Perhaps.

It is also possible that the friends of Barabbas knew that it was the custom of the governor to release someone at Passover so they had turned out that morning en masse just to make sure that someone released was Barabbas. There may have been some supporters of Jesus present, but remember, as Pilate makes his announcement, Jesus has only been in custody for a matter of hours. He was arrested in the middle of the night after most people had gone to bed. Today thanks to Twitter and Facebook, the news of a celebrity arrest is all over the world before the ink is dry on the fingerprints. But back then, outside of those within Jesus' inner circle, it is likely that few people would have known he had been arrested much less that they could show up and advocate for his release.

So whether because of a change of heart or just due to ignorance of his situation, in the end, the crowds that had been such an integral part of Jesus bold sweep through Jerusalem, failed him.

Now when we read these stories of Jesus' last week, we probably find ourselves commiserating with the Disciples, hoping we would have stood by Jesus instead of scattering like they did; or we compare ourselves to Peter, confident that we would not have denied Jesus like he did; maybe even thinking how difficult it must have been for Pilate to allow the crucifixion of a man with whom he seemed to find no fault. And maybe sometimes we are these people.

But today, we are the crowds. We are the great unwashed masses who need Christ to show us the way. We are the ones who, because of our sinfulness; because of our flawed humanity, in spite of our ability to get it right sometimes and because of the extent to which we so often get it wrong, need desperately the salvation that is somehow bought by the death that we help to cause and by the resurrection that overturns the sin of the world.

We are the crowds. We cheer... and we jeer. We wave our palms in the air; we pledge our support; we stand beside Jesus and follow him when it suits our expectations and our needs; we pledge our support when the messages are comforting, but when Jesus' words get challenging we find it all too easy to turn away, or worse, to simply allow His voice to be drowned out by other influences; by other voices that are softer on the ears and easier to follow.

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<sup>12</sup> Carter, Warren. "Notes on Matthew 27:15-23." *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. Ed. Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003. 1797. Print.

Was Jesus' death unavoidable? Was it part of a divine plan? That is the faith that we proclaim. But on a practical level it was inevitable because the only things preventing it were the presence and actions of the crowd; a crowd composed of sinful people who sooner or later, were always going to fail. It is one of the great ironies of this story that the flawed, sinful humanity of the crowds not only led to Jesus' death; but made, and continue to make, his death and resurrection necessary in the first place.

But today... well today is a day for cheering. And though we know where the story goes next, and we know that the cheering will eventually fade and we will all turn away, we also celebrate the good news that death does not get the final say.

But we'll talk more about that next week.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come.  
Amen.