

**April 9, 2017 (Palm Sunday)**

**TEXT: Matthew 21:1–11**

**TITLE: Joining the Crowd**

In honor of baseball's opening day, here's an easy trivia question for you. In the 1960 World Series between the Pirates and Yankees—final game, bottom of the ninth, score tied 9-9, name the leadoff batter for the Pirates whose home run won the game. Bill Mazeroski. At some point, I bet everyone of us has seen footage of that historic game—the initial high fastball from Ralph Terry and then the second pitch that Mazeroski clobbers over the wall; how, when he's rounding second base, he realizes he's won the Series for the underdog Pirates; and how the crowd begins pouring on the field, slapping him on the back after he tags at third and fights to finally touch home plate for the win. All over Pittsburgh, celebrations broke out at that moment. People poured into the streets, exuberant about beating the Yankees, becoming crowds of shouting, rejoicing, hometown fans.

Forming crowds is not just an American activity. People all over the world are known to take to the streets in crowds. Often it is to celebrate victory by a beloved sports team. Sometimes it is done to commemorate a national holiday. Other times it is a reaction to something—a protest or demonstration, like the Civil Rights marches of the past or the more recent ones in Washington, D.C. Ask yourself: Have you ever joined in a crowd to celebrate or march? What prompted you to do so? Was it the sheer exuberance of the moment or was it something more intentional and planned?

Joining a crowd seems like a universal tendency, but we need to ask ourselves, Is it a good thing? Groucho Marx famously said that he did not care to belong to any club that would have him as a member. Do we look cynically upon crowds as something we disdain joining, since they are so indiscriminate about their membership? It is one thing to be part of a celebration or someone marching for change. It is another thing to be a sheep in a blind herd, a lemming rushing toward a cliff, or a fool swept up by rhetoric and emotion heading for disaster.

More specific to today: Would you have joined the Palm Sunday procession? What would it have taken for you to leave your place of comfort and join the crowd waving branches and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David"?

Bruce Birch is a Christian ethicist, and in one of his books he reminds us that human society is a fellowship not only of those now living and their children, but also of all those who have gone before us. The ideals and moral legacies of the past live on today. By being in Pittsburgh now, we are part of Mazeroski's homer from fifty-seven years ago. By being in America now, we are shaped by the stories of pilgrims and immigrants who found their way to this country; the legacy of pioneers, the stain of slavery, the thrill of the moon landing, and the memories from two world wars. All these stories and life lessons are passed on in school classrooms and on national holidays. But it is also true that the internalization of our shared stories is a selective process. You and I don't remember everything. We don't cling equally to every story from history or honor other

people's experiences as passionately as we do our own. This too is a fact associated with being part of a larger crowd: What stories do we tell ourselves and what vision of the world do we collectively pass on to our children? That is why it is good to consider these things if we ever find ourselves swept up in a crowd—to ask ourselves “Is this truly a good thing?”

On Palm Sunday long ago, Matthew's gospel describes “a very large crowd” who went behind and before Jesus, shouting, waving branches, laying their cloaks on the road as a type of carpet of honor for him to ride over. The title “Son of David” meant that they saw in Jesus a quality of royalty; he was someone who could sit on the throne of King David. Remember how Matthew's gospel began? It is this gospel that has the infant Jesus visited by three magi from foreign lands, who bowed before him in homage and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Now, thirty-some years later, a crowd again gives Jesus all glory, laud and honor, hoping that through him change will come to the land—through him the Roman oppressors will be chased out of town—through him things will get better at last.

Palm Sunday was an intentional event. When Jesus gave instructions to his disciples, he had clearly thought through the logistics of that day—even going so far as to provide them with an answer to overcome possible objections when they went to borrow a donkey. And the act of entering Jerusalem in a procession involving cheering disciples, branches, garments and shouts of praise was an intentional, provocative act. The Roman authorities were always on edge during these big Jerusalem festivals. The streets were clogged with out-of-towners, swelling the city population far beyond its normal capacity. That Palm Sunday was no subtle event. It was meant to shake things up. Jesus came to change the rules of how the game of life is played, something we are far too prone to forget.

Going back to baseball for a moment, I recently read how representatives of the 14 teams active in 1857 came together to try and standardize the rules for this new national pastime. For example, there were significant differences between the versions of baseball being played in New York as opposed to that in Boston. The Massachusetts games were long affairs—first team to score 100 runs won, one out per inning, and most significantly batters could be called out by being hit by a thrown ball while running between bases. Surprisingly, it was the New Yorkers who were more gentile, playing only until 21 runs were scored and never intentionally throwing balls at baserunners. In the 1857 debate over rule changes the Boston teams insisted it was manlier for outs to require some measure of physical pain, while the New Yorkers eventually won the day, declaring that only savages ran around fields pegging balls at one another.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus came to change the rules—to make us less savage, less violent, more people of God and less people of the world. I don't know if that happened just from Palm Sunday. If all someone experienced was being part of the crowd that day in Jerusalem, I don't know if that would have been enough. Watching a replay of Mazeroski jogging around the bases doesn't make you a real Pirates fan. Joining the crowd on Palm Sunday, waving branches for a few minutes, doesn't make you a follower of Christ. It is part of

the story we tell—part of the legacy we pass on to our children—and part of the way we prepare for what is about to unfold as Holy Week and Easter approaches. But God wants more from you and me than just being part of a crowd.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, scripture says “the whole city was in turmoil” (Matthew 21:10). That’s a strong word, typically used to describe earthquakes and violent storms. The city was shaken up by Jesus—Can the same be said of us today? With churches on every corner, all pretty much recalling Palm Sunday right now, do you see signs of turmoil? Maybe we don’t want real change. Maybe we come to church to be comfortable, to be social, to be part of a crowd of pleasant like-minded souls gathering in places of familiar ritual with no turmoil.

Well, I’m sorry, but that’s the wrong impulse and the wrong crowd to be a part of. Amid the turmoil of that day, people kept asking, “Who is this man?” The answer came back, “This is the prophet Jesus from Galilee.” The prophet—the voice crying in the wilderness, the outsider who upon entering the Holy City went to the temple and disrupted the business class by overturning the tables—the one who disrupted the religious class by breaking rules about healing on the Sabbath, talking to the poor, eating with tax collectors, letting his body be touched by outcast women—the one who disrupted the military by avoiding violence, that last bastion of savages even today—and the one who disrupted the government by claiming a kingship that needed no throne.

Christianity is not a club, nor is it simply being part of a crowd. It involves intentionally looking at Jesus—this Jesus who is in our midst, humble, quiet; this Jesus who speaks truth to power; this Jesus who teaches, breaks bread, weeps, and prays; this Jesus who will be shuttled through a sham of a criminal justice system and nailed to a cross; this Jesus who will be abandoned and alone, even as he prays while crucified “*Father, forgive them; they know not what they’re doing.*” This tragic story holds our attention—pulls us in—and at the same time, others are pulled in as well, beside us, strangers and family alike. We become a crowd only because we recognize that we are all looking at the same thing, the same person, this prophet and Prince of Peace named Jesus.

Something in this Jesus is different. Something in him, because of him, changes everything. Palm Sunday’s crowd didn’t make Jesus—Jesus makes us a Palm Sunday crowd, a gathering of all sorts of people whose common identity comes not from themselves—their gender, race or sexual identity, their nationality or wealth, their age or ability. No, our identity now comes from God in Christ Jesus, to whom in life and in death we belong and whom alone we serve. And that changes everything.

AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> “On Sports,” Jay Caspian Kang, *New York Times Magazine*, April 2, 2017, p. 17.