

# NOT GOOD IN A CROWD

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We have been reading through the Gospel of John and find ourselves today at the story of Palm Sunday as recorded by John the gospel writer. You may have noticed something about John's Gospel – he tells the story of Jesus in a very different way than do the other Gospel writers. And if it weren't for John's Gospel we wouldn't have many of the gospel stories that we cherish today. We wouldn't have that conversation with Nicodemus about being born again. We wouldn't have the woman at the well. We wouldn't have doubting Thomas. And another thing we wouldn't have is Palm Sunday. John is the only one of the Gospel writers who actually mentions palms in the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He tells us specifically that it was palms that the people put before Jesus. The others don't mention palms, per se ... they just say that the crowd put leafy branches on the road before Jesus. So it might be safe to say that if we didn't have John ... today would be called not Palm Sunday ... but Leafy Branch Sunday. And, I suppose in turn, we would be called Church of the Leafy Branch. So thank goodness for John!

Thank goodness also for John because it is John who doesn't forget to tell us that Palm Sunday was connected to a major, major event in Jesus' ministry ... which quite curiously does not get mentioned in the other three gospels. John reminds us that Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem was preceded by probably the greatest miracle of Jesus' ministry — the resurrection of Lazarus. The raising of a dead man to life. A story we talked about last week. And so John tells us that the crowd came to greet him with palms ... but he also tells us why they came to greet him with

palms ... it is because they've heard about Jesus amazing miracle. My goodness, this man has raised a dead man to life. We got to go out to see him! And not only did they come to see Jesus ... but they came to see Lazarus too. They wanted to see the evidence of Jesus' work. Almost like a circus show, the crowd gathered to see the amazing Jesus ... Jesus and the living dead man. And so in John it makes sense that the first word out of the mouths of the crowd — was Hosanna! And what does Hosanna mean? Save **us** now! Save **us** now! You see, in John's gospel the crowd takes on this unique character. These are people who have gotten the word that Jesus can do some pretty amazing stuff and they want in on the action. Hosanna. Save us now.

Imagine the word getting out that there is a man hanging out down at the local 7 Eleven who will bless your lottery ticket. And if he blesses your lottery ticket you become an instant winner. Imagine the crowd that would soon form! So Jesus raises a man from the dead and now all of a sudden there is a crowd.

Which is OK, I suppose, if you are a crowd person. Are you a crowd person? Some people are crowd people and some people are not crowd people. Some people when they walk into a crowded room ... kind of get their energy from the crowd ... and so they work the crowd. Shake hands, hug people. Others when they walk into a crowded room immediately feel uncomfortable, they get the heeby geebys. And so they try to find one person and get that person off to the corner and they just talk to that one person. It's not they are snobs, it's just that they are not much for crowds. Some people are crowd people because they can hide in a crowd. To be in a crowd means you don't have to have a real deep or intimate conversation.

When you are growing up you often have to think about the crowd. Often, you feel, you have to please the crowd. You don't have to but you often feel like you have to. Because if you don't please the crowd you often pay a heavy price. So people are different, there are some who like crowds ... and there are those who don't like crowds.

Jesus, it seems, wasn't much for crowds. Oh, it's not that he wasn't in crowds; he was in crowds all the time. Every time you turn around in the gospels Jesus has a crowd following him. He is teaching the crowds ... healing the crowds ... feeding the crowds. So Jesus is in crowds all the time. But that isn't to say that he liked crowds. It seems like when you read the Gospels Jesus is always trying to get away from the crowd. He crosses the sea to get away from the crowd. He's always going off alone, away from the crowd. It was the crowd in Nazareth that turned against and almost threw him off the cliff. It was the crowds who pressed into him. Jesus knew what crowds were like. He knew of their demand. Jesus knew the volatility of the crowd. One day you're the Savior, the next day you're the devil himself. You know what crowds are like. One day you're king ... the next day you're the goat. Public opinion polls are changing all the time. So Jesus knew about the crowds. You can't always count on the crowd.

Do you ever hear of Jesus changing an entire crowd? Do you ever hear of Jesus winning over an entire crowd? Great crowds followed him. Great crowds listened to him to be sure. Great crowds were inspired by him. But Jesus always knew that crowds were simply collections of people. Individual people.

And so it is no coincidence that you read often how Jesus is walking through a crowd and he stops and finds the individual. The woman bleeding. The blind man on the side of the road. The

tax collector Zacchaeus up in a tree. It seems that in the crowd ... Jesus is much more anxious to find the one person. The one person whose life he wants to change.

Have you seen those “Where’s Waldo?” books. Each page is a picture filled with people, hundreds of people, and what you have to do is find Waldo. Funny looking Waldo. Waldo with is glasses and striped shirt. Where’s Waldo?

I wonder if Jesus is looking for Waldo ... and for Susan ... and for John and Mary and Gloria and Pete. Single people.

In John’s gospel it is Nathanael and Nicodemus and the woman at the well and the blind man and the woman caught in adultery and Lazarus and Pilate and Thomas. All those people he singles out in the crowd

And so on this Palm Sunday when the crowd runs out to meet Jesus and the palm branches are waving before Jesus, and the coats are being laid before Jesus, you have to wonder if Jesus does not receive this crowd with some caution. He knows what crowds are about. He knows what how fickle public opinion can be. And he also knows that Friday is coming and the crowd will be a very different crowd. From king to criminal.

So what does Jesus see on this Palm Sunday? At Church of the Palms? It’s great to have a crowd but he knows that it is just a crowd. And he knows what crowds are like. He knows that only twenty percent will show up on Friday. He knows that the place will be crawling with people on Sunday ... and he knows that the following Sunday is the lowest attended Sunday of the year!

Jesus doesn't put much stock in a crowd. But Jesus puts a lot of stock in people. He puts a lot of stock in individuals. He puts a lot of stock in you.

And I wonder if that might not be a message for us to hear on this Palm Sunday — that as Jesus walks into and through our crowd today what might really be in his heart is a desire to get together with you ... just you. To get you off into the corner and spend time with you. To talk with you. To listen to you. To heal you. To instruct you. To examine you. To question you. To change you. Might that not be what Jesus really wants to do?

But is that what we want Jesus to do? Do we really want Jesus to step toward us in the crowd and say ... hey, let's go grab a chair and spend some time together. Might there be a little fear in us of what he might find if he were to really spend some time with us?

There is something safe about just being in the crowd — shouting Hosanna!!! Save us now. Just bless the whole lot of us, Jesus!! Just make it quick because I've got things to do, places to go, people to see. Do we really have an interest in Jesus stopping in the crowd and inviting himself into our lives? Do we really want that kind of salvation?

Imagine if you were not feeling well and you went to the doctor. And after running a bunch of tests the doctor says to you – “Well, I've got good news. What you have is treatable.” And you breathe a sigh of relief. And you wait for him to pull out his prescription pad. And then he says, “And the treatment is for me to get to know you. To really understand what makes you tick. And to do this I'd like to meet with you every day. A little bit of time every day. So I can keep examining you and learning what your habits are. And I can encourage you to live the good life. The treatment

for what ails you is for you to make me a part of your life. And you won't have to pay a dime." What would you say? Would you do it? Or would you ask if he could just write you out a prescription ... you know, some antibiotics that you could take in ten days and be done with it. Would you be tempted to say "Save me now!!"

Do you see the point? The Palm Sunday crowd of which we are a part is eager for Jesus' ministry but they want it now and they want it quick and they want to be on with their lives. But Jesus is one on one. Jesus is the builder of relationships. Jesus is in this for the long haul. That's how salvation comes. That's how healing happens. That's how people's lives get changed.

Do you share with me the reluctance to let Jesus into your life ... I mean deep down into your life? Do you resist the examination he will have of you? Do you resist time he may want to take you? I sure do!! And yet I know that my greatest friends are people who I will allow to take up my time. And I also know that Jesus wants to be my friend. To really be my friend. And a real friend is a person you let get deep inside. A real friend is a person whom you will allow to know you, to examine you, and to encourage you and to walk with you. Jesus comes to us in the crowd to be the deepest friend we have. And that can be scary and that can be comforting.

Imagine with me for a moment that tomorrow morning the phone rings ... and you pick it up there at your desk at work ... or at home ... or wherever it is you will be tomorrow morning and the voice on the other end is a correspondent from 60 Minutes. You know 60 Minutes, the news show that usually makes mincemeat out of the people they talk to. You remember Mike Wallace. You never wanted to get a call from Mike Wallace. So you answer the phone and the voice on the other end says - "This is Mike Wallace ... 60 Minutes ... and we need to talk." What would pass through

your mind? “What did I do now?” And just his voice and name — “Mike Wallace ... 60 Minutes ... we need to talk” ... would make you quickly think through all the things you have recently done. All the little lies and corners you cut that maybe he might want to know about. And just the sound of his voice would make you go through a hasty period of self-examination. Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing to do. In fact, it may be the best thing a person can do for you is to make you think about who you really are. The best friend may be the most probing of examiners.

A friend of mine got a call from Mike Wallace once. And this is how the call came to be. My friend had fallen into a time of depression. He was at the end of his rope. Those of you who know what depression is about know how desperate a depressed person can feel. My friend was desperate. And during the crisis of his depression he read an article about Mike Wallace and how Mike Wallace at one point had suffered a severe bout of depression. And that he had experienced the same desperation as did my friend. And so after reading this article my friend wrote Mike Wallace and told him of how helpful it was to read the story of his battle with depression and how encouraging it was for him in this desperate time. It was about ten days later that the phone rang and the voice on the other end said, “This is Mike Wallace ... 60 Minutes ... we need to talk.” The examiner had called to encourage. And what followed was thirty minutes of conversation that kept my friend hanging on.

The probing examiner was also the caring encourager.

And is this not what we find in Jesus? The probing examiner and the caring encourager ... all in one. The greatest friend we could ever have. The one who journeys to Jerusalem and makes his way through the crowd. The one who journeys to Sarasota and makes his way through this crowd.

And when he looks at the crowd what does he see? He doesn't see a crowd. He sees you. He sees me. And he just wants to be our friend. He just wants to be the best friend we could ever have.