

Riverside United Church
April 6, 2025

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“Jesus’ Last Hours: #5 The Volatility of the Crowd”

When I doing my Bachelor of Arts degree at Dalhousie University, back in the previous century, my major was sociology. And the learnings from those sociology courses have been very helpful in my understanding and analysis of groups and society at large.

One of the topics I remember - I don't think it was a full course - but it was on the sociology of crowd behavior. I remember learning that studies had shown that there was a dynamic in a crowd that could overtake individual choice or reason. I remember seeing it act out within myself in those days when I went on a student protest march regarding tuition costs. I thought I would go as an observer, but I was soon shouting whatever the slogan was that the crowd was chanting.

I have often thought about that experience and that sociological theory of crowd behaviour when I read the gospel accounts of the crowds that are part of the gospel record. We often hear that Jesus drew crowds to hear him speak. One of the remembered crowds was when all the disciples could find for lunch were five loaves and two fishes, and yet the crowd of 5000 had food leftover. Perhaps it was a dynamic of generosity that defined that crowd. Next Sunday, we will hear the story of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. As we remember that story we imagine a dynamic of inspiration, hope as the crowd shouts “Hosanna - God save us.” And today in the story we heard, the dynamic in the Jerusalem crowd has shifted to be angry, vengeful, “Crucify Him.”

What have been some of the dynamics of crowd behaviour that you have experienced or witnessed?

The most frequent crowd that I am part of is at a hockey game and there is a volatility to the mood of a hockey crowd. Great joy one moment, and then a crowd can turn on a referee or an opposing player. I was at the Senators game on Feb 1st, a few hours after Donald Trump had made one of his first declarations about tariffs on Canada. That crowd made the news because a minority of the crowd booed the American anthem. What wasn't as widely reported was the great enthusiasm and pride by which the Canadian anthem was sung - probably the most engaged I have ever seen a hockey crowd sing the anthem.

But I think the largest sports crowd I have been part of was at a Grey Cup game in Regina - but that crowd was too cold to have more than a dynamic of survival, and maybe a little bit of despair as we witnessed - for the only time in history - an American team win the Grey Cup.

A couple of years ago, there were some of us that joined a counter protest in the Broadview Ave area of Ottawa. There was going to be an anti-trans protest in front of a school, and so a counter protest was organized to communicate that there was support for the rights and dignity of trans people. There was a crowd dynamic that day that became aggressive in trying to prevent the movement of the other protest. It was a bit more than my comfort level.

Have you had experiences when a crowd shifted in tone or purpose? Have you ever been in an angry and vengeful crowd?

In the biblical story, I wonder how many in the Sunday crowd were also in the Friday crowd. And how would they characterize the dynamics of the two crowds? How would they account for the changing of their minds and their shouts?

The last hours of Jesus' life have moved from the grace of the table, through the garden of anguish, the actions and responses of Judas and Peter, to a so-called "trial" before Pilate. In the reading today, we hear in Luke's account how Pilate tries to de-escalate the situation by saying that he finds no charge against Jesus. Herod is in agreement. But, somehow the crowd has a say. Maybe it is because there is a custom of releasing a prisoner, and it is the crowd's choice. And for some reason they want Barabas. We don't know much about him but he is an insurrectionist and murderer. Imagine such a resumé getting pardoned.

The story of Jesus' last hours has a variety of layers and meanings. There are a variety of theological interpretations to this story. It is hard to know what was understood at the time, but I doubt that theories of atonement and forgiveness of sins, were part of the crowd's decision. I imagine that Jesus' death had more political implications than theological ones at the time of his death. It was a time of Roman occupation and political turmoil. The religious leaders played a part in his death maybe because of jealousy, maybe because of tradition, maybe of fear and confusion about what was going on.

The volatility of the Jerusalem crowd invites us to reflect on the dynamics that affect how a crowd responds. Our own experience, and the experience of other historical chapters, invites us to reflect on the dynamics that affect how we respond to the challenges and realities that we face as communities, collectives, societies.

There are a few things that may affect the degree of volatility.

One may be the level of fear and anxiety that is held in the soul of the crowd, or in the souls of the individuals in the crowd. We live in a time when there is lots of anxiety, fear and existential angst about the direction we are heading, about what the future will hold. I am generally a person

of trust and hope, but over the past while there have been moments where I find myself living with a deep sense of anguish as I listen to the dominant voices in our world. There seems to be impatience, a short fuse that can set a person or a group to assume the worst, to jump to conspiracies, to have little willingness to understand a differing perspective, or to offer the grace of a second chance.

A second factor, echoes a comment that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, regarding the tone and message of leadership. There is lots of leadership that seems to incite, rather than inspire. And as Luke tells the story, it seems to the religious leadership that is inciting the crowd in Jerusalem to accept nothing less than “Crucify Him!”

It is truly distressing that studies show that human behaviour is more influenced by the negative, by the tearing down of the other, rather than by inspiration and invitation toward possibility and promise. It is even more distressing that many of the leading voices of negativity are the voices of religious leaders who incite fear, hatred, and violence towards those who are different.

The most effective rallying toward a common purpose seems to be when there is a common enemy.

A third factor of volatility seems to be the level of information available and the communication of that information. I can remember a couple of experiences of being in airports and there being delays with flights for a variety of reasons. That can be a volatile crowd. One time there was little information offered and the crowd of passengers gone more and more frustrated and so when an airline official there was almost a storming of the desk. Another time when there was a much more complicated situation, the waiting passengers were given regular updates and the crowd remained calm, even when we were told that there’s nothing we can tell you. An honesty of communication was effective.

As Luke tells the story of the last hours, I feel a bit sorry for Pilate, because Luke conveys that Pilate tried to communicate and show leadership - to a point. As one commentator - Fred Craddock, said about this story: “When minds are made up, there is little room for reason.” After a particularly conflicted church meeting years ago, I remember seeing a sign in a take out restaurant that said, “My mind is made up, don’t confuse me with the facts!” There seems to be a lot of that these days.

We live in challenging times and it is important to remember that as individuals, we are part of various crowds. Some of those crowds gather in person, and others are part of the collective of our society. While various dynamics can affect the mood and behaviour of the crowds, we are invited to seek to live the values and principles that we hold as important and true.

Pilate’s question of “What is truth?” echoes through these last hours of Jesus’ life, and the quest for truth resounds through our search for what it means to live faithfully and fully in the spirit of Christ to make a loving difference in the world.

We do live in a challenging time, but I suspect that there have been few times in history, that have not been challenging times, because we live with the mixture of human dynamics and circumstances which are beyond our control. What we can control is how we live with the uncertainty, the fear, the turmoil of our lives and world. So may we seek to inspire rather than incite, may we seek to build bridges across divides, may we seek to offer examples of compassion, of acceptance, as we find ways to nurture and share the truth of our lives. And may we know that the energy of love and hope, the presence of the Holy is at work within and among us. Amen.