

# Sermon Text for September 9, 2018

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## *Psalm 118:19-29, Acts 4:1-5*

“Crowd Control”

Isn't Facebook amazing? I have a cousin who posted a video of him burning all of his Nike gear and people spewing profanity in supporting what he is doing. I know my cousin well, if I were to sit with him in a room we could talk together and sensible minds would prevail. But Facebook creates a mob mentality where public lynching is not unusual. I also have incredibly close friends who have changed their Facebook page to just the face of Colin Kaepernick with a whole slew of people on their page voicing their support. I think if a stranger were to look at my Facebook friends and see the diversity that was represented there, they would think it was somehow made up.

As a pastor I feel called to stand in the breach, and boy is the breach wide and deep these days. So much of the breach is created by mob mentalities which refuse to listen to the other side. There is right and wrong. It should not be difficult to say that something is wrong when it is just plain wrong. It shouldn't be difficult to speak against a clear immoral stance and a clear trespassing of Christian values. But when you are in a mob or a group of people who are not speaking out, at best apathy reigns, at worst you become an accomplice.

Reinhold Niebuhr in his well known book on Christian ethics called *Moral Man and Immoral Society* states that when we are left to ourselves we will usually make the correct moral decision. Take each of those individuals on Facebook writing profanities and lighting things on fire, they would make a different decision if they weren't in a crowd platform called Facebook. In a crowd, well, that is normally not the case because when everyone else is doing the wrong thing you are likely to follow along with that crowd.

Today, both of our Scriptures talk about crowds in very different ways. Psalm 118 is a psalm that has so many memory verses in it: the cornerstone, this is the day that the Lord has made, give thanks for his steadfast love endures forever, but this psalm was primarily used by the crowds greeting the pilgrims as they made their way into Jerusalem. Acts 4 speaks of a crowd that could not be stopped from turning their lives over to Christ, 5,000 of them, because the Holy Spirit converted them and spoke to their hearts. Today we recognize that we are not alone and isolated here in Strasburg, but

rather that we are a part of a much bigger worldwide body called the church. How are we called to live our lives as individuals and as a body?

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

Okay, where are we in Acts? Peter and John have healed this paralytic man who jumps around the temple and now is clinging determinedly to the leg of Peter, and Peter begins speaking and you know that when Peter speaks, people listen. We are still in the miracle story and we are still looking at the fallout, or the repercussions of that healing in the temple which allowed that man to make his way into the temple for the first time in his life when he could have a personal relationship with his Creator God. Who could be upset with that? In fact, in this story the ones who object and get upset are the Sadducees as we see here in verse 1.

Do you remember who the Sadducees were? They were part of a Jewish school of thought that believed that talk of resurrection was heresy. So when Peter talks about Jesus being raised from the dead, as we read in vs. 2, he went too far. Even if there was someone hugging Peter's leg they arrested him, vs. 3, and told him to stop preaching.

But it was too late, 5,000 people believed in the Saving power of Jesus Christ, we see that in vs. 4. They tried to stop the power of each one reach one, but just could not. They tried to stop the power of the Gospel by stopping the people, but it is not possible. All of Acts is a testimony to the impossibility of stopping the power of the Gospel. You can arrest and kill the individuals, but you cannot stop the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit.

You know what this Scripture in Acts reminds me of? Where else in the Bible do we see the religious leaders annoyed and angry at the impact of the Gospel and in the face of a crowd? You know the story of Palm Sunday. When we look at the Scripture in Luke with Jesus riding in on a donkey into Jerusalem, the same issue arises. You may be able to control the crowd, but you cannot control the message of Jesus Christ, of hope and freedom and unconditional love from the creator God, that is our message. Remember Luke is responsible for writing both Luke and Acts so it should be no surprise that we have this common theme. You may stop the people, but when you do even the rocks and stones themselves will shout out in praise to the name of the living God. Just like what Psalm 118 tells us.

We are headed to Israel again this year and one of the highlights for me is always walking down the same path that Jesus would have walked down from the Mt. of Olives into the city of Jerusalem. We do it every year and some years it is only our group going

down that cobblestone hill. Other years it is filled with tourists from all over the world. I prefer the latter because that is what it would have been like when Jesus was there on this pilgrimage day as they shouted hosannas. It helped to imagine this narrow winding passageway with Jesus on a donkey and the crowd, oh the crowd surrounding him and pressing upon him. Jesus knew the time had come for him. He knew that in a few days their words would change from Hosanna to crucify him.

Mobs have a frightening effect on people. Today they are using the words of praise in psalm 118. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Then the next Friday we hear, we have no king but Caesar, crucify him. Same people, different occasion, different cultural swing, different message. Who is it that sways the cultural messages that we hear. If someone tell us to hate a person because they are peacefully protesting, we do because we feel like we can translate their narrative into a language of hatred which is our narrative even if they tell us that it is not their narrative. But we make it their narrative.

How easily we are swayed to tag along with our culture and the crowd thinking and often attributing the label Christian to what is happening around us. We struggle outside of the crowds in our own lives to know what the right and the wrong thing to do is. It is hard to go against the crowd. But go against it we must if it is not of God, if the agenda is that of winning at all costs.

In Luke we find that the ones who get the most upset when things seem to get too out of hand with the crowd are the religious leaders. Just like in Acts a group of the religious hierarchy speaks out in anger. Maybe they sound like us in so many ways worried about our reputations, what people think and say about us because of the crowd that we travel in or the church we go to. When we are part of a crowd that loves Jesus and wants to reach out to others, it can get a bit rowdy at times. It is easier to blend into the crowd and not really speak out.

But there has to be some level of emotion that we find in our own relationship with Jesus. We don't all have to be amen'ers, or hand raisers, and we certainly don't all have to be no movers, emotionless. A few is okay, but not all of us like to worship Jesus in that way. We've got to feel excited, hopeful, exhilarated. The crowd felt good about Jesus, I love feeling great and feeling passionate and pumped up about something. The excitement I feel as we are planning this trip to Israel, I'm pumped! The energy that we

have in worship on Sundays is exhilarating. But our feelings are so unreliable, so fickle, just like those of the crowd.

There was probably just as much excitement on that Palm Sunday as there was on that crucifixion Friday. But the fickleness of human excitement, of crowd mentality, is of absolutely no match for the steadfastness of our God and the power of his witness that cannot be stopped. Jesus' response to the request for crowd control was: even if this mob were quiet, the rocks themselves would shout out, not just speak, but shout out and would clamor for witnesses to the Savior.

Those 5,000 people were turned to the same God to worship and praise the Savior. As were the 3,000 before that. The church started off really well. You can control the crowd, the people involved, but you cannot control the message of hope and love that is found in our Savior. Pharaoh tried to control the crowd and Moses came along and said let my people go and God's truth won out. Haman tried to silence God's message by killing the crowd. Queen Esther said my God is an awesome God. Queen Jezebel tried to control the crowd with her magicians and Elijah brought fire from heaven and the message went on.

The Sadducees tried to control the crowd by arresting Peter and John but it was too late, 5,000 came to believe, and the message went on. Satan tried to control the crowd the best way he knew how. Kill God and put him in a grave and put a stone over it. I've got some good news for all of us gathered here today. If we do not go out into the world to reach people for Jesus Christ, well someone may control us, but no one can stop the Word who on Easter morning showed to the world that you cannot stop the power of our God.

This church is in a place in its life where we have opportunity and potential in front of us. But we do need to ask periodically if we are just following the crowd as the crowd gets larger and larger. Do we find our power in the people, the programs, in the pastor, in the buildings, in our position in society. Or is the power found in Jesus Christ who reaches out to you away from the crowds and says take the road that is less traveled.

Christianity is a movement that cannot be forced into a movement, a church, a political party, or an ideology. We must be willing to be controlled by the Gospel and not attempt to control the Gospel with any of the above mentioned agendas.

The crowd can be stopped, but not the message, all creation, even the stones proclaim of God's goodness. Amen.