

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 13, 2014
Palm/Passion Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22:1-11
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 26-27

One of the questions I always find myself asking when I read the Passion narratives is: “How could the crowd be so fickle? How can the crowd hail Jesus as king on Palm Sunday, and in just a matter of days call for his death? How is it possible that their *cheers* turn to *jeers* so abruptly, so cruelly?

I suppose there might be many reasons for this.

Could it be, as one scholar believes, that Jesus’ popularity was declining, and Palm Sunday was just a temporary rebound in his approval rating?

Or is it possible that the crowd on Palm Sunday and the crowd on Good Friday is not the same crowd, or at least not identical?

Or is the whole scenario as it plays out merely a part of God’s plan, i.e., that Jesus had to die for our sins and this is how it all plays out?

How can the *cheers* turn to *jeers* so quickly, so abruptly?

I submit to you another reason: *The reason the cheers turn to jeers so abruptly is because we human beings not only have the capacity to hurt and destroy one another, but we sometimes derive pleasure in doing so.* Hidden in the

depths of our hearts is a dark spot wherein we actually receive some sort of twisted pleasure at the pain (and even demise) of others.

There is an intriguing word for this in the German language. The word is *schadenfreude*. It's a word composed of the terms "damage" and "joy." The dictionary defines the word *schadenfreude* as "satisfaction or pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune." It is "malicious joy in the misfortune of another."

Think of the ancient coliseum. My son Davis asked me several years ago, "Dad, did Christians really get thrown into the coliseum with lions?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Were they given anything?" He asked. (As in, to defend themselves.)

"I'm afraid not," I responded.

Come with me to a more modern version of the coliseum, this time where the gladiators put on skates and try to move a puck down the ice and into a net. Observe the crowd dynamics at a hockey game. At some point in the game, a fight usually breaks out, and it can be an amazing (and frightening) thing to observe the crowd behavior.

And if our bible texts for today are any indication, a crucifixion was perhaps the ultimate example of vicarious violence. A crucifixion was *schadenfreude* on steroids.

Why was the crowd so fickle? Why did Jesus have to suffer the way he did?

I submit to you this morning that Jesus' suffering was the result of *our* penchant for hurting and destroying one another. Something in us enjoys watching others suffer because it allows us to express (vicariously through others who are inflicting the pain) our own capacity and desire to cause pain.

We are the crowd.

Some might say, "Ah, come on, pastor, there's no way we are like that!"

But I would submit to you this morning that we are not only capable of behavior similar to the crowds who called for Jesus' death; we sometimes demonstrate similar behavior in our own lives.

Take, for instance, our political leaders. It's one thing to disagree with a person's policies or political ideology. But surely we would never derive pleasure from a person's political (and personal) setback or failure – *would we?*

Perhaps we have competitors in the business or athletic or professional realm. Surely we have never experienced *schadenfreude* when one of our colleagues has suffered a failure or a setback – *have we?*

We have all had the experience of being in a public setting where someone was embarrassed and humiliated. But you would never hear us laughing along with the crowd – *would you?*

Our theatre and television screens, our modern music, and our modern novels are littered with gratuitous violence, but surely it's not because there is something dark deep within us that derives pleasure in that violence – *is there?*

The word “gospel” means “good news.” And it is the job of the preacher to herald glad tidings. But on this particular day, I have some additional, and very important, news for you:

We are the crowd.

One of the most moving experiences I've ever had in church occurred 30 years ago in a chapel service at MidAmerica Nazarene University. It was Good Friday. A blind student, Sandy Dunn, stood at the podium and sang these words:

*The city was Jerusalem, the time was long ago;
The people called him Jesus; his crime was the love he showed.
And I'm the one to blame; I caused all his pain.
He gave himself, the day he wore my crown.*

*He brought me love that only He could give,
I brought Him cause to cry;
And though He taught me how to live,
I taught Him how to die.
And I'm the one to blame; I caused all the pain;
He gave Himself, the day He wore my crown.*

Given this reality, what are our options? What can we do?

For starters, we can do what we have been doing throughout the Lenten season. We can confess and acknowledge *who and what we are*, and what we are capable of.

That's why confession is always an important component of Christian worship, or at least should be. Worship is always characterized by celebration, but it should never be limited to that. Worship must include confession. As Pilate learned, absolution and forgiveness does not come from denial. It comes through humbly acknowledging who we are and what our hearts are capable of apart from the grace of God. And both the biblical witness and our life experience show us that apart from the grace of God we are hell-bent on destroying each other, and at times we take pleasure in doing so.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us come with the full awareness of that dark spot in our hearts that compels us to hurt others, that place in us that enjoys watching others suffer and takes pleasure from their pain. Let us pray for ourselves, and for our world. And let us seek the grace that heals us and makes us whole.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.