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St. Thomas Lutheran Church  
Bloomington, Indiana

I've been preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary for about three decades now, and every year something different catches my attention. This year it's the crowds. There are crowds everywhere. Even where there aren't any, like in the garden. They want to arrest Jesus away from the crowds...but they bring a cohort of soldiers (600 of them!), PLUS an unknow number of temple guards! That's quite a crowd!

There were crowds when he entered Jerusalem, greeting him as a savior, as the messiah, as a king.

And there was a crowd when he was brought before Pilate (were they the same crowds?) that sang a different tune than the one sung less than a week before. Their chants of "Hosanna!" have changed to cries of "Crucify him!"

It's interesting hearing about all of these crowds in the days of social distancing. (And to think that Judas betrayed him with a kiss??? "Back off, Judas! Are you trying to kill me??")

There are a couple of things that we should note about the crowds...and about us.

First, we need each other. It started out in the garden when God noticed that it is not good for the man to be alone. Paul writes about us being the Body of Christ, all widely diverse parts of the body (who very much need to remain diverse in order for the body to function), but inextricably bound together in one body (one crowd?). Whether we like it or not, we're stuck with each other. That's the way God made us.

And Scripture bears this out. In spite of our culture's near worship of rugged individuality and admiration for those who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, this is not how it works in the Bible. David Lose wrote this last week,"

*While we as a culture tend to idealize self-reliance and individualism, the stories of faith remind us that we find our identity, meaning, and purpose less through individual accomplishment and far more in and through our relationships with others.*

The need for social distancing has only increased our realization of the fact that we are interconnected and interdependent. We were made for each other and we need each other. While I'm so very thankful for the technology that allows us to continue to "gather" together, however virtually that may be, it only makes us hunger and thirst for the day when we can gather together, raising our voices in song and prayer, sharing the blessed Sacrament of the Altar with each other. As a wise woman wrote in a prayer she shared with me: "Sustain this congregation's mutual love and joy until we can stand once more in our circle around the table of Christ."

David Lose again:

*But the virus hasn't simply taught us the importance of gathering together, it has also reminded us that we are united as much by our vulnerability as by our strength. This virus knows no bounds and strikes irrespective of age, race, economic status, faith, or nationality. While it may take an unfair toll on particular demographics, its specter looms over all of us, and if we are to flourish amid, and not merely survive, this pandemic, it will take a concerted and unified effort. For this reason, we keep apart for a time that we may gather again sooner. And it's why I believe it's not enough to affirm that "we will get through this," but also and always add, "and we will get through it together."*

We were made for each other and intended to be a blessing to each other and all creation. It is so beautiful when that happens, it makes me weep. As it says in Psalm 133: *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*

But that's not how it always goes and we know it. The best part of the church, I've long said, is the beautiful people God allows me to work for and with. And the worst part of the church is all these dang sinners that God forces me to be with! And in this gospel reading we clearly see the dark side of crowds. They greeted him as the messiah and savior he really is when he entered the city, and they call for his death a few days later when he's not the kind of messiah they're looking for.

In all of this we can see ourselves. There are times when we are courageous, faithful and jubilant, and other times when we find ourselves fearful, faithless and disappointed. The old song asks the question, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The answer is always and forever, "Yes. Since he bore the sins of the world and I am a sinner of the world, I nailed him to that tree. Or at least I did nothing to prevent it."

Everyone in this story is acting out of fear. Except Jesus. Everyone else does horrible, corrupt, damaging things because they are afraid and do not know what's really going on here. In some ways, this reads like a comedy. All of these people trying to save their own skin or their position of power, they're all scared and, in spite of themselves end of fulfilling scripture. In their efforts to have their way with Jesus, Jesus has his way with them. They think that by killing him they have won, but nothing could be further from the truth. They and the fear and the consequent sin are exposed for the sham that they are. They are grasping at life but they grope in the dark and misunderstand everything that's going on.

David Lose again:

*Yet amid this hauntingly realistic portrayal of humanity, we find reason for hope. Because Jesus came for all – faithful and faithless, courageous and fearful, steadfast and fickle, admirable and disappointing. Jesus came for all. All of us. Every part of*

*us. Each and every one of us. There are days when we might see ourselves among those who recognize and celebrate God's Messiah and others when we identify with those who abandon him to an unjust fate. Yet wherever we are among the crowds, Jesus came for us.*

*I am not, as I've confessed before, one who believes God causes evil and suffering "for some greater good," far less "to teach us a lesson." But I do believe that the cross testifies powerfully that God is constantly at work, even amid calamity, heartache, and loss, for the good of those God loves (Rom. 8:28). And perhaps one of the painful "goods" that will emerge from this pandemic is the powerful and poignant reminder that we are interconnected and interdependent, that we were made for each other, that we cannot thrive by ourselves, that we each have a role to play in helping build the kind of community God desires, and that God in Jesus came for all of us because God in Jesus loves all of us.*

We are all in this together. Whether we see clearly how God is continually working in and through all things for good, greeting our savior with thanks and praise...or we find ourselves scared and acting out in sinful, destructive ways, we are joined by a common humanity and a state of being that Luther described as Saint and Sinner simultaneously. That we are sinners should be self-evident. That we are saints? Not so much. But thanks be to God, for in Christ he showed us what the fearless life looks like, a life completely aligned with Reality, with the way things really are. God is in charge and God loves us. And Jesus walked the path of obedience to the Father unto death, even death on the cross.

All the forces of sin and evil – ours included – were thrown at Jesus. But even death could not stop him. God's love truly wins.