

March 29, 2013  
Good Friday  
All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia  
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In one of his noontime sermons this week, our Holy Week preacher Tom Tewell reminded us that whenever crowds are mentioned in the Bible, they are almost always grumbling and mumbling. Crowds, in the Gospels, seem to be synonymous with discontent.

And our Good Friday reading from the Passion according to Luke is no exception. In this reading, a retelling of the trials of Jesus before Pilate and Herod, the crowd is an assembly of the elders of the people, those who have brought Jesus to trial.

And their grumbling is murderous.

This crowd claims Jesus is perverting their nation with his healing and his teaching. And only a few days after Jesus exhorts them to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, the crowd claims he is forbidding them to pay taxes.

The grumblers in this crowd are so fused together in Luke's gospel that they cease to even have an identity as a crowd. After their initial identification, the crowd is referred to as simply "they".

They brought him...

They said...

They began to accuse him...

They were insistent...

And as this insistent, pressing, heaving crowd, they move, as the New Revised Standard translation tells us, "as a body." More even than losing their identity as a crowd of people, they have lost entirely their identities as individuals. They are no longer priests and carpenters, fathers and sisters, individuals with dreams and agendas, they are just "they", a grumbling, murmuring body hell bent on seeing blood for a transgression they'd long forgotten the root of.

They were the very definition of "mob mentality." They had lost sight of their own needs and desires, they had lost sight of their friends and neighbors and were moving as one unstoppable force, a force that demanded death.

We are familiar with this, are we not? Think of a time when you have just gone along with the group so as not to offend or be ostracized. Think of the history of our nation when we have veered in the wrong direction in order to avoid facing difficult truths.

Mob mentality, group-think, at its worst, strives to make sure that the issue looks obvious: you're in or you're out. And if you're out, harm will befall you, so you'd better be in. Think like us, live like us, look like us, or else.

And in this situation, with Pilate, it worked. Not wishing to incite any more violence than his turbulent region was already experiencing, Pilate did the minimum of what he was supposed to do as governor: He questioned the prisoner. Pilate questioned Jesus and found no guilt in him. Jesus was innocent of the charges that the chief priests had brought against him. Pilate saw through the sham. Pilate wanted to dismiss the whole affair as a nuisance, but faced with the threats and the frenzy of the grumbling, murmuring, angry crowd, he caved.

But not all groups are out for blood. I think people, individuals working together for a common cause of goodness, of Godliness, can act as agents of positive change.

Think again to the history of our nation. The Civil Rights era was a dark time. There were those who fought and screamed for oppression, who used violence and mob mentality to segregate, thwart, maim and even kill. But there were other groups, too. There were mobs for good, groups of thinking, thoughtful people who knew, who *believed* that love would win. And it did. As a nation, we came out on the right side because of the crowds, the murmuring, grumbling, crowds that would not let the madness of institutionalized racism continue.

I know that most people are not as enamored of Facebook as I am, but I recently had an experience of group think that gave me hope. As the Supreme Court prepared to vote on marriage equality bills this week, a trend began on Facebook among my friends. Folks were swapping out their Facebook profile photos in favor of the Human Rights Campaign's square red marriage equality symbol. So all down the left side of my Facebook feed were these little red boxes instead of the faces of my friends. The effect was that more people started to learn about what that little red box meant then changed their profile pictures as well.

Soon, within hours, thousands of people were expressing their support for marriage equality in a very public witness. For a day or so, Facebook—as I saw it—turned red with support for the HRC and marriage equality. Whether you approve of the cause or not, this is an example of people across great distances and disparate backgrounds to express their singular support for a cause they believe to be right. It is group think, but it is born of love and strives for love.

Unlike the great “they” who screamed for Jesus' death, we can work together, think together, stand together as a body to push our leaders into positive, lasting change. We can, together, draw the kingdom of God nearer to us.

We are not called to lose our identities to the angry mob. We are not called to forget who we are, what we do or what we hold dear. We are called by God to be fully and totally who we are, with integrity, not just a faceless bit of “they”. The

lesson of the assembled, grumbling crowd is that we have choices: we can work together to make change in the world or we can give ourselves over to bloodlust and madness.

For what are you murmuring and grumbling? For what are you allowing yourself to “group think”? Will you be a part of the crowd that thrives on the weak-mindedness of its faceless members, the crowd that calls for *and receives* death? Or will you join the Body of those who rely on the strength of God to work for life and thriving?