

Faces in the Crowd

Sterling UMC
March 28, 2010
Luke 19:28-40

Several years ago, I was able to do something very exciting. For my birthday Robin's mother bought us tickets to go to see the Washington Wizards play the Chicago Bulls in an NBA Basketball game. I love basketball so it was very exciting to be there along with a crowd of close to 10,000 people to experience a game in person.

When we got there and found our seats, I discovered something. The game was being televised. This made things even more interesting. Overhead in the center of the arena was the scoreboard equipped with a huge television screen. So each time there was a great play or spectacular dunk not only did we get to see it in person but also it was shown on the screen in slow-motion replay. There were cameras all over the building covering the game from all angles.

During time-outs and other breaks in the action you couldn't help but notice the cameraman turn his camera on the crowd. He would begin to scan the crowd, and people were able to see their faces on the screen overhead, as the camera would pause on them.

I'm sure most of you have witnessed something like this before. The camera moves from one person to another lingering for a moment on some of the faces in the crowd. Usually you see quite a variety of people. Young and old, men and women, boys and girls each of them there for different reasons. Some wildly cheering for their team, some waving and making faces at the camera. Some greet the camera with the famous "Hi, mom". Then you see the ones who are only marginally interested in what's going on and completely unaware that their face is being seen by thousands of people, and sometimes the camera even finds some that by the look on the faces or by the fact that their eyes are closed you wonder why they even bothered to show up.

This morning I would like you to transport yourself in your mind to that first Palm Sunday. Imagine with me that you are there along the streets of Jerusalem with that great crowd of people witnessing something infinitely more important than a basketball game, the arrival of the Messiah, the Savior, Jesus Christ into the city. And stretch your imagination to picture what it would have been like if that great event was being televised. There are cameramen all around capturing all the excitement. And you can see the action not only for yourself but also on the television monitor in front of you.

As you look off into the distance there is something on the horizon. Dust from the dry desert road rises as a crowd approaches. People begin to gather to see what is happening. Then someone comes up from a distance out of breath saying that it is Jesus. Jesus is coming!

The word begins to spread like wild fire. Soon the crowd is growing larger. People are lining the street, pushing in on each other to get a better look. There is an explosive air of expectancy and uncertainty everywhere.

Suddenly, as the procession nears you can see him. It is Jesus. The Messiah. But he is riding on the back of a donkey, a simple beast of burden. Journeying with him were his most loyal disciples - Peter, James, John - and even Judas. From Bethany a

host of loyal followers come after him.

As he approaches their enthusiasm grows and the people start taking off their coats and throwing them in the road. Others break off branches from the palm trees and spread them in his path. Some are even carrying palm branches in their hands, a sign of victory. All around there are cheers and shouts. As he comes nearer you can hear what the people are singing, "Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest!" The atmosphere becomes almost infectious.

As the procession goes by, you look down at the screen and notice that the cameraman has turned his camera on the crowd. It was a strange conglomerate in the holy city that day and as the camera scans the mob, you can't help but notice some of the faces in the crowd.

The camera pauses first on the face of a woman. Her face, once pale and anemic, is now radiant with beauty. Her eyes once sunken and desperate are now alive; lovingly gazing on the one from whom she had received healing from her disease by simply touching the hem of his garment.

We see the face of a man who until recently had to keep his face covered with a veil because leprosy had nearly eaten it all away. He is now standing there smiling, waving in his once fingerless hands a palm branch. Shouting, "Hosanna!" at the top of his lungs.

Next to him is a man with the most peaceful and serene look you have ever seen. His face had been contorted, his hair wild and matted with dirt, his eyes blazing with the torment from a legion of evil spirits. Now he is calm and composed. He is clean and he is at peace.

These are the faces of his friends. His followers. His disciples. These are those who had been drawn to him at some time during the preceding months. They had heard him preach or had seen him do some mighty work - like feeding 5,000 hungry people, healing the sick, or even raising the dead. Their lives had been touched in some way by his gracious deeds and their lives had been changed. Utterly transformed. And they would never be the same. Their love and devotion to him was written all over their faces. There was no mistaking it.

The camera then focuses on the face of another man. Earlier he had been asking a lot of questions, wondering, "Who is this man Jesus, and what is he doing?" Now because everyone else seems to be excited about this man on the donkey he gets caught up in it too. He joins the chorus of voices shouting, "Hosanna!" But as you look at him you can't help but sense that he is just shouting empty words. His roots are shallow, and devotion temporary. There is no depth to his belief. It is purely superficial. He is what you might call a well-wisher in the crowd. Here is a man with no previous exposure to this Jesus. He sees no harm in him and feels that the cause he represents is good. So he waves his palm branch for the sake of the cause but makes no personal commitment. When the cheering stops and the excitement of the day has passed, so does his dedication.

Next you're startled to see a man pushing and shoving his way to the front of the crowd. He is doing everything in his power to get to Jesus. As the camera pauses on him you see a look of determination on his face. Obviously he wants something. He

begins screaming at Jesus trying to get his attention. Jesus continues his journey without acknowledging the man. He then tries another approach. He grabs a branch from a nearby palm tree and runs and waves it in Jesus' face thinking that will surely make him listen.

Perhaps Jesus senses his attitude because Jesus seems to look right through him. So you watch as this man throws down his palm branch in disgust and walks the other way. He is what we would call an exploiter. You know, those people who affix themselves to one movement in order to sponsor another. He was there to get for himself and to further his own cause. He wanted the fringe benefits he could get by supporting the things Jesus stood for. He would accept the benefits of Jesus Christ but was not willing to give his time, talent, or possessions for his cause. He was there to take, not to give. And if it didn't work out in his favor he wanted no part of it.

The camera scans the crowd and comes to rest on another face. This is the face of a strong young man with a helmet on his head and a sword in his hand. He is a Roman soldier, standing on the sidelines. During the Passover thousands of extra Roman troops were brought in as reinforcements --to make sure the Jews were kept under control.... they were there to keep the peace, make sure no trouble erupted... To put out any fires before they grew.

And we can be sure when this crowd of thousands began their celebration that it got this soldier's attention. But he quickly discovered that this was a harmless gathering and offered no real threat to them. It was best he determined to just leave them alone. His attitude was just stay in your place Jesus and don't bother me, and we'll leave you alone. He was indifferent to what was going on in the streets that day.

The camera stops on a robed man. His face is angry. You can tell by the way he is dressed that he is one of the religious leaders, part of a group known as the Pharisees. He is a part of the crowd but he is certainly not part of the celebration. He can't stand the shouts of the crowds calling Jesus the King and the Son of David. Each Hosanna rips through him like a knife. He feels all of this cheering and shouting of praises is sacrilegious and blasphemous. "Just who does this Jesus think he is, challenging our religious authority?" He was one of those who felt most threatened, because Jesus had brought the searchlight of criticism down upon his holy places, his cherished teachings, and his traditional legalistic practices, exposing his hypocrisy. All of this cheering and shouting was just stirring up trouble.

Somewhere along the parade route he can no longer contain his boiling anger. Finally, when he couldn't take it any longer you see him go up to some of the disciples and tell them to make Jesus to tell the people shut up. But Jesus answers by saying, "If they be quiet, then the very stones would cry out." There was no kindness in his face, only hatred, anger, and bitterness, as if he were plotting some sort of evil. The Pharisee was lost in his stubborn pride and his refusal to acknowledge Jesus.

The camera then moves across the crowd and then pauses on one last face. It looks strangely familiar. It is one that you have seen countless times before. You recognize it as your own. You find yourself staring right into your own eyes. Take a look. Take a good hard look. What do you see? Does your face bear any resemblance to any of the other faces in the crowd?

Do you see the face of a Pharisee? One consumed with legalism. Concerned more with traditions and outwardly doing all of the right things, saying all the right words,

and yet under that mask of holiness there is the face of hypocrisy? Unwilling to give up your own power, pride, and wrong attitudes?

Maybe you look and you see the face of the indifferent Roman soldier, a face that says, "just don't bother me Jesus, you can go on with your parade, let other people praise, serve and worship you. I just want to live my life the way I want, do my own thing, and not be bothered.

Perhaps when you look into your own face you see the face of the exploiter. Your only interest in Jesus is what you can get from him. As long as Jesus follows your plan, fulfills your needs and desires, as long as Jesus agrees to act like a puppet on a string or a genie in a bottle, making no demands, then you shout his praises. But when the road gets rough and rocky or when you have better things to do you are the first to throw down your palm branch and leave the parade. You're willing to take, take, take, but you're willing to give nothing.

Or does your face resemble that of the well-wisher? You smile and acknowledge Jesus because it seems to be "the thing to do". Or, "Everyone else is doing it." So on Sunday mornings or on special days like today you smile, and wave your palm branch to pay homage to him as he passes by, but on Monday mornings you forget all about him.

Or is your face the face of a friend? A disciple? A true follower of Jesus Christ? Does your face glow and radiate his love? Do your eyes blaze with the fire of devotion? When people look at you can they tell there is something different about you because Jesus Christ has touched your life?

There are many faces in the crowd. Which face is yours? What do you see? Do you like what you see?

The good news this morning is that there is hope! The same Jesus who has touched the lives and changed the faces of so many others can touch your life, change your heart and change your face. He wants to do it. But he won't do it by force. This morning take a good long look at your face. Why not take off your mask. Why not remove all of the make-up that you use to cover up your face and let Jesus do what he desires to do. Open your heart and let him touch you. If you will, just as he marched victoriously into the holy city on that first Palm Sunday, he will come into your life today and touch your heart, change your face, and make you a person of true beauty.