

Sermon: Palm Sunday C (Luke 22:39-23:56)
28 March 2010, Christ Church Riverdale, Bronx NY
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It's a short phrase in the middle of a very long story. An unremarkable phrase, not at all vivid like the rest of the high drama. It's a phrase you could easily miss among the powerful and memorable scenes in the Passion Gospel. This phrase is only four words long: "And their voices prevailed." "[The crowd] kept demanding with loud shouts that Jesus be crucified, *and their voices prevailed.*" Trials in the court of public opinion are nothing new; they've been around for centuries. We've only gotten so good at it these days that we've raised it to an art form.

The truth can be a minor factor in the court of public opinion, more often an inconvenience or a detriment to good TV ratings. A prerequisite for any high-profile legal matter these days is to get to the media first and with the most firepower. Put your version of events out for the public to see, and let the other side try to defend against it. Legal analysts discuss strategy more than truth. We even get to register our opinion! We can vote by clicking a box on a website or calling a number that comes on the TV screen whether a person is guilty or innocent, when we've only seen secondhand reports of the trial. (Interest in what the law actually says is optional.) Sometimes the results of these votes seem to get reported with as much fanfare as what actually happened in the first place. It's important to ask carefully *whose voices will prevail?*

Over the past couple of weeks our news has been dominated by the debate and passage of health care reform. Maybe you like the bill that was adopted or maybe you don't. I don't see how it can be quite as good as the Democrats say or nearly as awful as the Republicans say. Certainly in such a complex overhaul there are things reasonable people can disagree about, and yet the ways some have expressed their disagreements have been anything but reasonable.

Last weekend the House of Representatives was considering the main health care bill. There was a "Tea Party" protest beforehand, in the area members of Congress walk between the Capitol Building and their offices. As congress members passed by the crowd responded to them depending on whether they were for or against the legislation. "Kill the bill!" was the most frequent slogan, aimed at supporters of the reform bill; congress members who opposed the bill were greeted with cheers. So far it was pretty typical American political demonstration. Then members of the Congressional Black Caucus started approaching: "Boo!" "Boo!" (thumbs down) Only after booing for most of the time these African American representatives were walking past did the group get around to, "Kill the bill!" Several heard the N-word come out of hiding and one black congressman was spit on. The slurs were not just racial in nature, but sexual in the case of Barney Frank. Now vigorous debate and expressing our convictions are good things, but when people raise hell--when they bring that kind of attitude into this world--then there can be hell to pay.

It feels powerful to express our opinions, to vent our emotions without having to be constructive, but first-century Galileans and Judeans didn't get to vote or enjoy freedom of

speech. The Romans ran things and everybody knew it. The local puppet officials were tolerated as long as they did what they were told, but the average citizen had no voice at all, no vote, no power. That is until times like this, when Pilate, the Roman governor, comes before a crowd finding a man named Jesus guilty of no crime deserving death.

"Crucify him!" a few shout, then more, pretty soon the whole crowd. You can feel the sense of power surging through the crowd as it turns into a mob. "Crucify him!" drowning out anything the governor could say, as he looks first angry, then embarrassed, then helpless. "Crucify, crucify him!" they shout; we shout, louder and louder until the voice of death prevails. The court of public opinion has rendered its verdict; how's that for power? But the truth? The Truth isn't shouting. He's bent under the weight of a cross, silently walking to the place of his execution. The Truth doesn't say "You're going to burn in hell for this," as some have yelled regarding the health care vote. Jesus says, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Not just some human beings, but all of our fellow human beings are created in the image of God. Just as most of the members of the crowd outside the Praetorium didn't start the day intending to shout, "Crucify him!" so most of the Tea Partiers didn't get up last weekend and say, "Let's go boo some black congressmen!" But when a crowd turns into a mob, all bets are off. People who have lost their livelihoods and seen their life savings tank are often angry, furious, and scared to death! Anger and fear send us into more the primitive parts of our brain that focus on "freeze, fight or flight." And oh does it feel powerful to be part of a mob!

But a mob attitude can also be much more subtle; we can be just as unreflective in our thoughts as in our shouts. A genteel mob attitude can dismiss "those Jews" who shouted, "Crucify him!" It can dismiss "those right-wingers" who booed African American leaders. Oh, we're *nothing* like them! Except that we are. As Christians we differ not in category but in degree--sinners redeemed by Christ very much needing God to work on us daily. People sober in AA for years and years will sometimes be asked, "So how long were you were an alcoholic?" "No," they'll say, "I *am* an alcoholic, a *recovering* alcoholic," even if their last drink was some time during the Nixon administration.

So we as Christians are sinners God is working on and as such we're called to seek out the image of God in others all the more when that image is distorted by hate and fear. So we as Christian sinners God is working on respond to our call to love God with heart and mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves, especially when those neighbors need a lot of work themselves. When we resist joining the mob--be it rowdy or genteel--but instead reach out in powerful love as sinners God is working on, we're not shouting to make our voice prevail over the voice of someone we disagree with, nor are we dismissing our fellow sinners, our fellow human beings. When we reach out in love, we're praying that God's voice is the one that will prevail.