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John 19:1-16a NRSV

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." So Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate[a] said to them, "Behold the man!" When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar."

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat[b] on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew[c] Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover, and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Oh University Mennonite Church, before we dive in, can we just acknowledge how terrible this passage really is?

Our Lenten journey has arrived at a text that begins with Jesus being flogged, given a crown of thorns, mocked with a fake title, and trumped up political and religious charges that will eventually lead to his crucifixion. There is nothing here about redemption, no silver lining, and at least for the time being - no happy ending. An absolutely brutal passage for those of us who are already feeling depleted or in need of good news.

So what do we do with a text like this? How does it apply to our lives today?

In Leader Magazine's materials, one of the prompts invited us to consider the crowd, and our place in it. So as we begin, let's remind ourselves of what we know about this crowd. (SLIDE) The crowd in our text at first seems to be civil leaders - religious leaders and law enforcement - but it probably included some community bystanders as well. The voice of the crowd is a collective voice in John's Gospel - it speaks as if it has a singular official voice or stance. We might also assume that this crowd included Jesus' closest friends and followers, silently and anxiously watching the proceedings, wondering how this will all unfold.

Later in the passage Jesus is presented to the Jews - apparently a critical mass of Jewish people, but my hunch is that we could probably just say the people of Jerusalem. Pilate addressed the crowd, and they responded as one - "Crucify him."

So where do you see yourself in the crowd? Would you have been swept up in the mob mentality? Would you have joined those pushing for swift capital punishment? Do you see yourselves in the civic leaders, wondering how to handle this groundswell voice? Would you have been a silent bystander, or a counter voice trying to sway people in another direction?

I'm pretty sure I know where I would be.

My certainty is because at times it feels like we are living out a similar scenario in our world today. Now fair warning, explaining this parallel is going to require me to get a bit more politically partisan than some of us are comfortable with. But bear with me. All we have to do is change a few details...

Let's change Jesus to those who are politically marginalized or ostracised by our society today - after all, Jesus reminded his followers, "whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me." So perhaps Jesus is an undocumented immigrant. (SLIDE) We might also substitute the impoverished parent on welfare, the Muslim refugee family, the transgender clerk at the Walmart checkout, and many others in our society today. Next let's switch Pilate to a charismatic political leader tasked with doing the right thing. (SLIDE) I'm picking on our current President here, but we have loads to choose from, it doesn't matter which political party you align with. Let's change the religious leaders and law enforcement to some of their parallel characters in power today. (SLIDE) Then let's change the crowd to

an example of one of our angry mobs of today. (SLIDE) Again, I've chosen the MAGA movement, but depending on your political perspective, perhaps those people are chanting 'Black Lives Matter' or 'Down with Israel.' Either way, these are people who feel taken advantage of, frustrated by their lot in life, or alienated by systemic problems.

Does any of this sound familiar?

My place in the crowd is the one righteously judging the angry crowd from a distance, lamenting that I don't have the power to sway them in the direction I think is right. Perhaps I'd be organizing a counter protest (SLIDE) or candlelight vigil at the Allen Street Gates. I'd be the keyboard warrior, (SLIDE) furiously typing a pointed social media post or sermon, with biblical and historical references, hoping that my impassioned words would change people's minds.

Some soul searching this week as well as some conversation with Meredith, reminded me that when I take up this posture, it doesn't take long before I shift from criticizing the angry mob, to becoming the angry mob myself.

Any angry mob needs a villain to blame, and as our text demonstrates, really as our world demonstrates, it doesn't really matter whether or not that villain actually has impacted those people. The infamous Salem Witch Trials laid blame primarily on outspoken or passionate women for coincidental misfortunes. Hitler rallied his supporters by blaming the Jewish people for their woes. White supremacists have rallied supporters by blaming those with different skin colors. And our current wave of anger towards the immigrant, or the person from another religion, race, or gender, is fueled by a need to blame someone else for a variety of cultural frustrations.

Even our text this morning - this very passage where the crowd chants to crucify Jesus - has been used by antisemitic movements to blame the Jewish people for Christ's crucifixion, and as justification for hatred toward people of Jewish heritage.

We have a human tendency to pivot when we see a mob forming whom we disagree with, we make *them* - we make the mob - into the new villain and try and rally our own victimized mob to take them down. We tell ourselves that an

angry mob isn't a bad thing if we align with its principles. Mob mentality is only flawed when we disagree with its cause. (SLIDE)

And it also has a tendency to dehumanize. We make the collective villain nameless and faceless, or we give it a symbolic figurehead to hate. It was not lost on me the uncomfortable chuckle when Carl asked us during his reflection to consider the people who make life difficult to coexist. It's not easy to continue to be in a relationship with *those people*.

But here is where Jesus presents a radically different path.

The chief priests declare, "We have no king but Caesar." Caesar is the embodiment of temporal power, of violence, of forced submission. Caesar is the reason the Jews are living under systemic oppression. Caesar as a symbol offers a system of blame, oppression, and ultimately, death—the very system that is about to claim Jesus. When the religious leaders reject Jesus and embrace Caesar, they are choosing the way of the mob, the way of worldly power and fear. They are choosing the sword.

Jesus, even in the face of the mob and the state's violence, offers something else entirely. He embodies peace and nonviolence. When the religious leaders and the crowd demand blood, Jesus remains silent to Pilate's power-driven questions, speaking only to affirm a kingdom "not of this world." His power is not the power to crush, but the power to endure, to forgive, and to love, even unto death.

In our world today, when we feel the pull to join a mob—whether it's a political one, a social media one, or an ideological one—Jesus invites us to step back. He invites us to ask: Are we following Caesar, the king of condemnation and violence, or are we following God's way of peace? To follow Jesus means refusing to participate in the cycle of blame and anger. It means having the courage to lead *away* from the masses, toward nonviolence, toward empathy, and toward reconciliation. It means choosing the quiet, difficult path of peace over the loud, easy path of the mob.

One of the biggest challenges of this pivot is seeing ourselves in the other. Choosing to humanize instead of dehumanize. I know I'm guilty of blaming the faceless mob. But what if we saw ourselves in those people too? (SLIDE)

The challenge for us today is to recognize the face of Christ not only in the victims of the mob—the marginalized and the scapegoated—but also, incredibly, in the faces *within* the mob itself. They are not merely villains; they are fellow human beings, perhaps a kind of victim themselves, often driven by fear, frustration, and a deep-seated desire for justice, however misguided their expression of it may be.

Now don't get me wrong, we are also called to confront injustice, to speak truth to power, and to firmly take a stance against abuse and manipulation. Jesus does not call us to passively let an abuser continue to abuse. But neither are we called to ignore the humanity of those whom we disagree with. (SLIDE)

When we choose to see each other in our collective humanity, when we resist the urge to condemn wholesale, we begin to choose the path of Jesus over the way of Caesar. This pivot—from judgment to empathy—is the hard work of Lent.

May we find the courage this week to unclench our fists, to make sure our anger is beneficial and doesn't turn to chaotic violence, and to remember the one who, even when crowned with thorns and mocked, offered not retaliation, but peace and rest for those who are in pain. I'm also aware, because I shared this sermon with some folks ahead of time, that it probably raises even more questions which a singular sermon doesn't have the time to answer. Is a large protest or activism event an angry mob? When *should* we be angry? What does Jesus' third way really look like? Hopefully those questions spark more conversations for us here this morning. As hard as this Jesus' way can be to practice from day to day, may it be so.

As we transition from our sermon to a hymn of response, you'll notice that we only have two candles left on our journey through lent. We will extinguish one more today, reminding us that we will soon be at Easter. I hope you have found it meaningful - welcoming the darkness of the season, knowing that light will come again.

