

PALM SUNDAY 2014
West Valley Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Kim Engelmann

Do you like to watch people?

I am an avid “people watcher” in airports, and in restaurants and in stores.

People fascinate me.

While everyone else seems to be on their cell phones in public places, I prefer still to watch people.

Its just what I enjoy

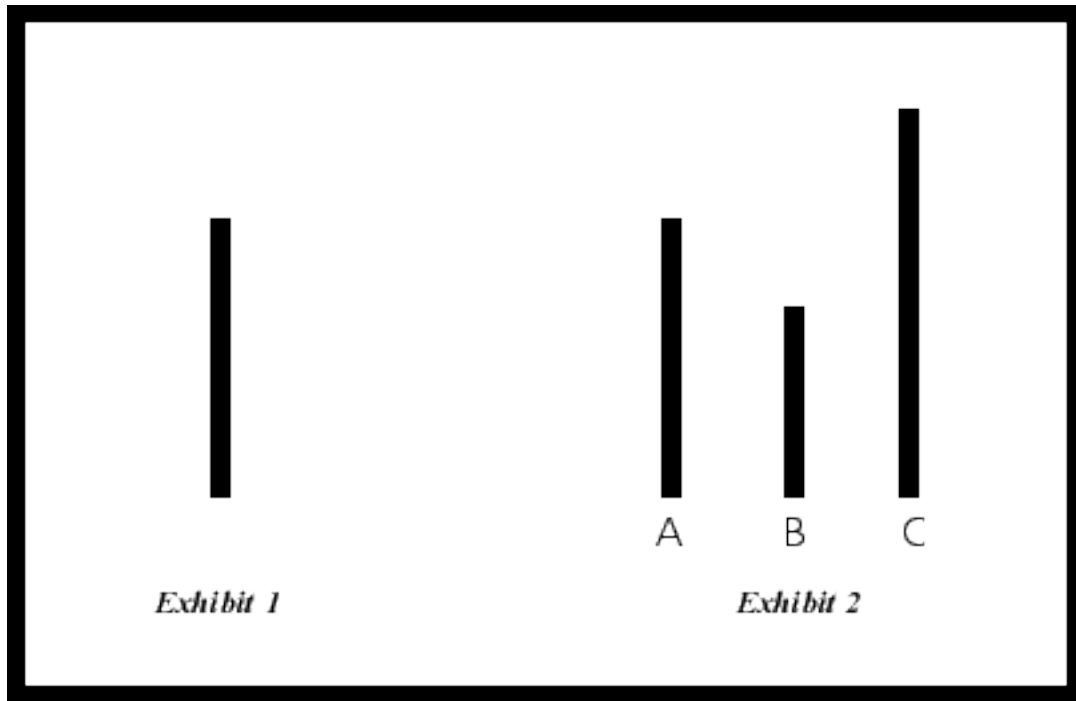
In so many ways each person is unique, but in so many ways behavior and reactions of people are very predictable as well.

Years ago **Solomon Asch** did a famous **classic study on conformity**. Maybe you have heard of it

This is how it went. Imagine yourself in the following situation: You sign up for a psychology experiment, and on a specified date you and seven others whom you think are also participants arrive and are seated at a table in a small room.

You don't know it at the time, but the others in the room are actually associates of the experimenter, and their behavior has been carefully scripted. **You're the only real participant.**

The experimenter arrives and tells you that the study in which you are about to participate concerns people's visual judgments. She places two cards before you. The card on the left contains one vertical line. The card on the right displays three lines of varying length. (SLIDE OF IMAGE BELOW)



The experimenter asks all of you, one at a time, to choose which of the three lines on the right card matches the length of the line on the left card. The task is repeated several times with different cards.

On some occasions the other "participants" unanimously choose the wrong line. It is clear to you that they are wrong, but they have all given the same answer.

What would you do? Would you go along with the majority opinion, or would you "stick to your guns" and trust your own eyes?

If you were involved in this experiment how do you think you would behave? Would you conform to the majority's viewpoint?

In this experiment on conformity about 75% of participants conformed at least once – to the wrong answer. Only 25% of participants never conformed. In the control group, with no pressure to conform from anyone, less than 1% of participants gave the wrong answer

Why did the participants conform so readily? When they were interviewed after the experiment, most of them said that they did not really believe their conforming answers, but had gone along with the group for fear of being ridiculed, and for a desire to fit in.

No matter how old you are...No one wants to be ridiculed. No one wants to stand against the tide. Its easier to just go with the flow, right?

There is no account in scripture that is more akin to this study than the crowds surrounding PALM SUNDAY and HOLY WEEK

Social conformity and crowd persuasion was intense as Jesus entered Jerusalem, preparing to die...

You have all these people... being influenced by one another. Now the crowd isn't always wrong. At first they are right in their praise...even though its misguided. They are praising Jesus as the Messiah – which in and of itself is a good thing. Altogether with one voice....

Together they shout out SAVE NOW (Hosannah)...sure that Jesus has come riding into town that day to deliver them from Roman occupation

JESUS was King, and Jesus wanted them to praise him, even though their understanding of what made him King and why was completely different than what Jesus had come to do

He knew he was going to the cross – the crowd had no idea of this.

So then a few days later those same exact people all join together and shout CRUCIFY HIM...*as sure as they were before that he was King...now they are just as sure that Jesus is a criminal in need of death.*

If that isn't a lesson in crowd conformity I don't know what is—its powerful.

How easy it is to join the crowd. How easy it is to assume that just because everyone else is thinking in a certain way, that we also ought to think that way as well.

I do it all the time myself.

I was at a performance recently that I thought was dreadful. It was a musical performance and in the end everyone clapped, and so did I. And then I thought, now wait a minute, they enjoyed it, but I didn't so why am I clapping?

I just sort of did it without thinking cause everyone around me was doing it.

To stick out, to be different, to not conform is not how we are wired. From an evolutionary perspective we need the pack for safety. If we pull back, or act in a different way than the majority, we make ourselves vulnerable to attack.

No wonder Jesus called us sheep. Sheep will blindly follow the pack. They just do for their own survival.

At the same time though...

Christianity is full of places that declare that we must stand against the tide of social pressure, in terms of the culture that we live in. To stand up for what we believe, even when it is hard and unpopular. To not conform, to not grow tepid about our faith, to have integrity and honesty and stand up for who we are as Christians. This takes tremendous strength and resolve.

This goes beyond pressure in the teenage world to say no to drugs, no to illicite sex, no to alcohol (my kids...challenged all the time to stand strong...don't go with the flow)...this pressure to conform is all over the adult world, and seeps into the workplace.

I wish Erich Shafer was here today. Erich operates in the business world and I wanted him to share a story with you about his own experience...but he has written it out so here it is...This is from Erich...

I was part of a team of engineers that investigated a defective product that our company designed and manufactured. As a team, we looked at all aspects of the failure – AND

As the issue began to settle down, I became aware that several layers of Senior Management above me wanted to review the issue in a meeting. Now, since the executive calling this meeting (our Sr VP) was 3 layers above me, my direct boss (Director) and his boss (VP) were called to present the issue to the Sr VP in the meeting. Because I was so central to work, I helped prepare the presentation material for my Director and ultimately was invited to "sit in the meeting"- this is usually code for join us but speak only if spoken to...

As my Director began to make the presentation to our VP and Sr VP, he left out a few crucial facts and reversed 2 events in the timeline. Now, i of course noticed this but no one else seemed to . As i thought about it, i thought to myself, these were not just trivial inaccuracies - these miscommunications changed the whole emphasis of the cause of the defect and, in fact, put my boss and our group in a more favorable light.

This review meeting with the Sr VP was THE meeting where the incident would be put to rest and long term changes to our processes would be authorized by our Sr VP. The way my boss told the story, a critical gap in our design review process would not be addressed.

The last thing i wanted to do was speak up. I was the only low level guy in the room, invited by my boss to "sit in the meeting" and, moreover, I had been ranked a top performer by my boss several years in a row and in fact was currently up for promotion to Director myself. What to do?

I decided to give my boss the benefit of the doubt - maybe he just forgot the facts. So I made eye contact and then gently gave him a queue that he had missed something. At that point, **it became clear the omission was not an oversight, it was on purpose.**

I'm no Little Goody Two-Shoes but this was a material mistake in THE meeting that counted most in terms of this whole incident. I thought for a minute to just stay quite. *Not my company, not even my presentation or my miscommunication - I just work here.*

A big promotion was just around the corner for me and would be great for me personally - a title, more prestige, more money, more

security. My family matters more than my company. But, i just couldn't stop thinking that a deceit was happening here and i was playing some part in it.

Now, what happened next is harder to capture accurately. I might say i "decided" to speak up, but i don't actually remember a decision. I remember thinking and thinking and thinking and then ... speaking.

I interjected, introduced myself, explained that i was close to the issue all along and had helped my boss prepare for the meeting. I never really addressed the fact that my Director had miscommunicated but i retold the story briefly with the added facts and corrected timeline. The room went COMPLETELY quite.

After what seemed like a hour but was probably 10 seconds, "Is this true?", the Sr VP asked my Director? He answered that yes, it was. The meeting ended a few minutes later after the Sr VP set his expectations with us all for robust follow up. I left the meeting certainly nervous about my future in the company but absolutely comfortable with what i said and how i said it.

I let go of ALL the things i couldn't control but I took control of the actions I could. I actually felt at peace with whatever outcomes came about.

My Director never really told me one way or the other whether his miscommunication was on purpose. My VP pulled me aside and basically threatened me with termination if i ever put my Director in a circumstance like that again. BUT, the big boss, the Sr VP called me the next day to tell me how much he appreciated hearing the true facts and that he knew how hard it must have been for me to speak up. "It's great to have you on the team Erich.

I truly value your integrity" That's funny, i thought, so do I...

What a huge challenge to stand out and be different than the crowd. To say, "Wait a minute. Just because everyone is rallying around this certain perspective or behavior...is that really something that as a Christian I can go along with?"

How do we stay strong, and not conform to the world's standards?

1. WE NEED THE CHURCH

And that is why we need the church. That is why it is important to come to worship, engage in Bible studies and fellowship so that we can stand against a culture that pulls us in the wrong direction so often.

Because we are creatures who do conform, we need the right crowd – the people of God – to conform to. Otherwise, little by little, in subtle ways, we are going to get drawn into destructive patterns and ways of thinking that separate us from God.

Its so subtle, a little compromise here and there. A rationalization, a shrug of the shoulders – an oh well..whatever – and all of a sudden we realize we haven't acted with integrity. You heard that wrestling in Erich's story, didn't you?

Further studies from Solomon Asch showed that if just one other person agreed with the participants response, conformity to the majority was far less likely.

We need to support each other as Christians who operate out of honesty and integrity in a culture that is often completely off the mark. We need each other. We need the church

Long ago, there once was a pastor who went to visit a man who had not been at church in a long while. And as he walked in the door he shook the mans hand and greeted him warmly. The man who had not been to church for awhile braced himself for a lecture, but the pastor said nothing about the man's absence from worship.

They talked for a few minutes, and then they both sat down by the fireplace. The fire was not a blazing fire, but it had about 20 coals that were glowing with heat right in the center of the grate. The pastor took a piece of cold coal from the bin, and using tongs put that piece of coal into the middle of those glowing nuggets in the fireplace. **(IMAGE)** Together he and the man watched as the cold piece of coal began to warm up from the other pieces around it, and then eventually it began to glow as well.

That was it...that was all that happened
Then the pastor got up to leave, saying nothing more.
But the man had received the message.
As he shook the pastors hand he said, "Thank. I get it. I'll see you in church on Sunday."

We need each other – to keep one another aglow with the Spirit and strong to counter a world that often pulls us into destructive patterns and compromise.

2. WE NEED AN EXTRA DOSE OF HOLY SPIRIT POWER

Look at Peter who had great resolve in this – on his own – he thought he could do it.
He wanted to stand out from the crowd.

He declared with resolve and conviction, **“Lord, even if all these other people deny you, I will not!”**

I am not going to be swept along by the crowd. I will stand firm, even if no one else does...kind of arrogant...in his classic compulsive way....but admirable at the same time

I think Jesus loved Peter’s heart. He wanted to do the right thing. He was convinced he could do the right thing.

But Jesus has to tell him, ***“Sorry Peter! Three times you will deny me and after you do that, the rooster will crow”.***

And by the way, in New Testament times, if you denied somebody three times that was cause for the one you denied to disassociate with you forever. Three times was it...you were cast off...because you had been disloyal to the friendship too many times

So what happens? With Jesus getting arrested, and the crowds clamoring for his death, Peter gets influenced...he gets scared and starts to worry about his own survival. He better conform...or else

He denies Jesus - those awful 3X.

Then the rooster crows, Jesus looks at Peter, and Peter goes out and weeps bitterly.

Have you ever felt like you’ve failed like that in your faith?

You’ve wanted to stand firm

You’ve wanted to stand against the crowd and you haven’t been able to do it

I know I have...and when I’ve failed I felt devastated

I remember feeling this way many years ago when I was in ministry at a church – I was going through a tough time and deep down? I was feeling like I was a hypocrite – being in ministry, telling other people about God, and yet at the time my own faith was so stale

So shaky

And I was doing one thing, and saying another

I was telling people to pray, and I wasn't praying

I was telling people to delve into scripture, and I wasn't doing it in my own life

A very dangerous place to be in when you are leading people

But I was disillusioned with God, because of some things that happened to me, and I didn't have a supportive group – I didn't have any glowing embers in which to immerse myself...

And I felt devastated that I was doing this.

I felt so guilty and wondered how God could ever connect with me again....

That's how Peter felt that day. Saying one thing, doing another...

He was devastated

A three-fold denial? After he said he would stand against the crowd?

Even though all these other people go this way...I'm going to stand against the tide...

What a hypocrite!

A bold pronouncement – and then an outright denial...

And because of the culture of the time...Peter truly believed that no amount of effort on his part could ever restore that relationship with Jesus again because of the meaning back then of betraying a friend three times – you were cast off...there was no hope of reconciliation.

That's why he goes out and weeps bitterly.

However, when Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – you can read about it in the book of Acts - after Jesus is resurrected, he is the one who stands up in a crowd of religious people – the same ones he was afraid of before and says...

**You were wrong religious people! You put to death the Holy One!
Repent!**

He isn't afraid anymore of what people think, or even for his own life. That's what the Holy Spirit does. He eliminates our fears and makes us passionate for Jesus Christ.

Peter is eventually crucified upside down actually, because he doesn't feel worthy to be crucified right side up, the way Jesus was.

(The history of what happens to the disciples after Jesus' death is fascinating and you can learn all about that piece that we often overlook by coming to the Maundy Thursday service where we will have actual actors here reenacting the Lords Supper, and we will be talking about each disciple individually – so don't miss that.)

What a different man Peter is after he is empowered by the Holy Spirit. He is able, finally, to stand up for what is right because the Holy Spirit is giving him that boldness and resolve.

So we all need to pray, "Lord, fill me with the Holy Spirit, because I am weak when it comes to conforming to the crowd – I am a sheep. I follow the herd....but you Lord are strong. You didn't back down from the cross...you did the hard thing. Help me not to back down when it comes to doing the right thing, even if its hard."

3. We Need The Rooster

There is a double meaning when Jesus tells Peter that the rooster will crow.

On the one hand a) **the rooster was the sign Jesus gave to Peter that he had denied him, and it was a desperately painful sign because the rooster crowed out his sin;**

No one wants to have their sin highlighted.

How difficult it is to be confronted by someone or something that shows us where we've gone wrong. Yuk!

But again, only that kind of confrontation can get us back on track.

I shared with you my struggle at one point in my life...saying one thing and doing another

Well, what got me back on track was someone who had the courage to be a rooster and who came to me and said to me *I can tell you aren't doing well. You don't seem authentic. In fact, I think you need to do some self-evaluation and figure out next steps; take a break, get back to basics, get into a pastors group, find yourself again, and get renewed in your relationship to God.*

And I did.

We all need that rooster to crow now again into our lives, right? It wakes us up... in the church we are called to be roosters to each other...keeping one another on track

However, on the other hand, a rooster crowing generally means what?, what does that generally mean?

It b) **The rooster crowing signals “There’s a new day coming!”**, as any of you know who grew up on a farm.

Usually that rooster crows early – at dawn – I have a friend who lives on a farm and that rooster crows in the middle of the night sometimes....dumb bird...two in the morning he’s pronouncing “MORNING IS COMING”

It was metaphorically if not literally the middle of the night for Peter when he denied Christ. It was such a dark time. At those dark times its hard for us to believe that we are forgiven, that the life and victory of God has the last word instead of despair and grief.

But that’s the truth. Its what our Christiana faith is all about.

So At the same time that the rooster declared the denial, it also declared there was a new day coming...– a resurrection morning –it was a declaration of hope that soon (even though the hour was still very dark).... Peter would be reconciled to the one he had denied...

And experience a reunion with Jesus – where **Jesus would address Peter as “friend” (John 21:5)** – forgiving him for his denial and his inability to stand against the crowd...and then **He would also ask Peter THREE TIMES “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-19)**...and Peter would answer YES LORD. Undoing the three-fold denial...with three statements of love and commitment...and then Pentacost filling Peter with the Holy Spirit...who then became a “rock” (PETER MEANS ROCK) and the leader of the first Christian Church.

This Holy Week I’d like to challenge you to stand against the crowd of hustle and bustle and all the commercialism of

Easter...making arrangements...going here and there...and making activity, and preparations for meals your entire experience. I'd like you to take a stand, and make the commitment to take some extra time to grow quiet and reconnect with God in a more profound way this week.

Take some time to pray. Reflect. Do some self examination. If you are here this week, come and take communion on Maundy Thursday, re-experience the message of the cross at our Good Friday service – we do these services for you so that your faith can be strengthened. (A LIST OF HOLY WEEK SCHEDULE INCLUDING PRAYER VIGIL WOULD BE GREAT HERE)

Make the time to go deeper for what is lasting/eternal...our infinite relationship with God...lets get right with him during this week....we need the church to help us do that...we need to pray extra for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (fantastic labyrinth!!!) to help us do that...and we need to confront our sin and recognize our weakness...and repent

And then comes the celebration. You can't really celebrate though until you know what the celebration is for. That's why we have this week to contemplate, to pray, to confess our sins... *You are going to have to be intentional about preparing your heart, cause the crowd out there will carry you off to other things that may seem more necessary but they aren't...* if you are intentional and make the time...Easter will be so much more of a joy...

Cause what happens is, when I really examine myself, when I really take stock of the evil in me, and the evil in our world, when I recognize my own weakness and my tendency to wander and get carried away with the crowd out there... become tepid in my faith...and follow the status quo...I become

so grateful for Jesus, his forgiveness, and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

He's the last word...not me and my junk..

Where would I be if it wasn't for him? For his promise in the midst of my darkness? For his desire for friendship with me.. For his relentless pursuit of me that drove him to the cross...

Friends, **There's a new day coming!** A resurrection morning. Lets prepare our hearts this week, this HOLY WEEK, so that we can celebrate with gratitude on Easter and celebrate well!!

Amen