

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
March 20, 2005
Sermon: "Hand Washing Versus Foot Washing"
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Matthew 27:11-26 (NRSV)

[11] Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." [12] But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. [13] Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" [14] But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

[15] Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. [16] At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. [17] So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" [18] For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. [19] While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." [20] Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. [21] The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." [22] Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" [23] Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

[24] So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." [25] Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" [26] So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

NOT OF THIS WORLD

Pilate is clearly frustrated with Jesus.
The religious leaders want him dead and have made all kinds of accusations against him, but Pilate can find no fault with him.

He tries to question him about the charge of sedition, the idea that he claims to be "King of the Jews." But, Pilate has no luck on that front either. In John's gospel when Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, Jesus replies cryptically,

"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." (John 18:36)

It's true. Jesus might be a crackpot, but he definitely posed no threat to Caesar. And so Pilate is faced with a dilemma. Should he sacrifice an innocent man or should he do what is just?

WHICH JESUS DO WE WANT?

According to our Scripture for today, Pilate tries a ploy to escape this problem. He offers the crowd a choice. It was the custom to release a

prisoner during Passover as a goodwill gesture. Crafty Pilate decided to give the people an offer they couldn't refuse.

He could release a notorious criminal by the name of Barabbas or he could release Jesus. The gospels of Mark and Luke tell us more, that Barabbas was arrested for insurrection and murder. This suggests that he was part of a political group called the Zealots who wished to overthrow the Roman government by force.

The New Revised Standard translation of the Bible brings out this Zealot angle in an interesting way that I had never noticed before. In some ancient texts Barabbas is referred to as Jesus Barabbas and Jesus is referred to as Jesus who is called the Messiah.

So both of these men are called Jesus. Now, the word Jesus comes from the Hebrew name Joshua and it means "God will save."

So the choice that Pilate gives the people is a choice not only between Christ and Barabbas. It is a choice about how they think God operates in the world. Would they find God's salvation in the political Zealot who was willing to use "any means necessary" to get the job done? Or would they find God's salvation in the man Jesus, whose kingdom of compassion and love for enemies was "not of this world."

The choice was not a hard one. The crowd cried out in one voice, "Give us Barabbas." To this Pilate replied, "And what about Jesus who is called the Messiah?" The crowd shouted, "Crucify him."

Pilate tried to reason with the crowd. He said,

"But why?
What evil has he done?"

But, the crowd shouts all the more, "Crucify him."

RIDE ON KING JESUS, RIDE ON TO DIE

Today we celebrate Palm/Passion Sunday. I usually opt to celebrate the Palm Sunday portion through music. It was a celebration when Jesus entered Jerusalem. "Ride on King Jesus," the choir sang (will sing in the second service). Mark has been kidding with the choir this past week by changing the words to "right on King Jesus."

Actually, those words would work as well. In effect that's what the people were saying when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that donkey. "Right on Jesus. You 'da man. You're the one who is going to let the Romans have it. You're going to lead the revolution."

But, when they learned that Jesus' kingdom was "not of this world" then they weren't so excited about him. The same ones who sang, "Ride on King Jesus" were now shouting instead, "Crucify him!"

A reporter interviewed a couple that had just lost their adult daughter in the destruction of the World Trade Center. As you might imagine, they were in great grief, and after an emotionally charged interview even the hard-boiled report felt the need to offer a word of encouragement. So he said, "Well, I suppose that when you go to your place of worship this weekend, you will, find some comfort."

The mother of the family replied, "We're not going to church this weekend. You see our faith teaches forgiveness of enemies, and we're just not ready for that."

That mother understood what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. She knew what it meant to follow a Savior who, when he was being arrested for crucifixion, refused to defend himself and refused to let his disciples defend him either. (Matthew 26:52) She knew what it was to follow a Savior who died forgiving the very ones who crucified him.

And she wasn't ready for that.

The question for us this morning is this, "Are we ready for that?" Are we ready for a Savior whose ideas of salvation are out of this world?

A PORTRAIT OF PILATE

Mel Gibson has released a new cut of his film, "The Passion of the Christ." This remake supposedly removes some of the violence making it more suitable for a wider audience. I can't tell you if that's true or not. I haven't seen it.

But, in reading a review I noticed that there are many Jewish leaders who are still up in arms about the movie. They don't like the idea that the Jews seem to be the bad guys in the story.

In particular, they think that Pilate is portrayed in an unrealistic way. No Roman leader would act the way Pilate acted in the gospels, they say. It was Pilate who put Jesus to death. That stuff in the Bible is just made up to make the Jews look bad. The people didn't say, "Crucify him." Pilate said it.

Now I can understand their concern. There is a long and sad history when it comes to the mistreatment of the Jews. We should listen to their fears and be careful to do nothing that would contribute to anti-Semitic thought.

However, I disagree with their evaluation of Pilate. Pilate's actions as portrayed in the Bible are entirely in harmony with actions that he had taken in other circumstances. For example, the Jewish historian, Josephus tells us that Pilate insisted on placing the Roman symbol of power, the eagle in the temple. Pilate then went to his summer quarters by the sea.

The governor was amazed to soon see 5,000 men coming to his summer home in order to petition him to remove the symbol. Pilate called in the militia to deal with this disturbance and all 5,000 men bowed to the ground, bared their necks and said, "You can cut off our heads, but don't desecrate our Temple."

Pilate backed off. He probably reasoned that killing these men in cold blood would cause even more trouble. And, as governor of this odd and explosive land, trouble was the last thing he wanted. Rome wanted governors who prevented trouble, not caused it.

The same motives governed the governor in his interview with Jesus. He didn't want to get involved in this dispute. No matter which group he sided with it would only mean trouble for him. And Pilate was dedicated, more than anything else, to his own interests.

So he did the prudent thing.

THE BLOOD OF JESUS

He washed his hands of the matter. He said in effect, "You crazy people do what you want to do, but know this, 'His blood is on your heads.'" To this the crowd responded again in unison, "Let his blood be upon our heads and the heads of our children."

That is an important symbolic statement. The crowd, of course, was being cruel. They were saying in effect, "We don't care whether you think this man is innocent or not. We want him crucified."

The blood of Jesus would be upon them and their children and all the world's children but not as a symbol of blame. God took an act of shame, and made it an instrument of grace. The blood of Jesus would become a symbol of hope because God would take this awful cruelty and turn it into the means of everlasting salvation.

No one would ever be able to wash his or her hands of Jesus ever again.

From now on, the symbol of the cross, that emblem of suffering and shame (as the old hymn puts it) would be transformed into a symbol of the Christian faith. Those who followed Jesus would think about the world, and they would think about God in a radically new way.

They would be new creations in Christ Jesus. The old kingdom would pass away, and the new kingdom would come into their hearts.

THE PROBLEM WITH PILATE

It occurs to me that the difference between the old and the new kingdoms is symbolized well by a comparison of Pilate and Jesus. Pilate was a "hand washer" all his life. That is, Pilate spent his life trying to do what was expedient instead of trying to do what was right.

In John's gospel, Pilate in his encounter with Jesus asks sarcastically, "What is truth?" How strange. Truth with a capital "T" was staring him in the face, and Pilate couldn't recognize him. When you've denied truth for as long as Pilate had, it becomes difficult if not impossible to believe in truth.

How many men had Pilate killed that his personal goals could be achieved? If you wanted to be a leader in Caesar's kingdom you had to leave your qualms about truth at the door.

But, no matter how many times Pilate lectured others about how truth was relative and how a "man had to do what a man had to do" the arguments didn't seem to ring true. No matter how many times he tried to wash the blood stains off his hands it did no good.

Pilate is a particularly poignant figure because, although he is a man from the ancient past, he is also right at home in the modern world. We have elevated hand washing to a science.

Like Pilate we can put the blame on the crowd. (We give it the fancy name of "peer pressure" but it's still the same old excuse.) We can put the blame on our parents. We can put the blame on the school system.

We can put the blame on the church. We can put the blame on our husband or wife. You might not believe this, but some even try to put the blame on their minister!

But, nothing works. Hand washing doesn't work any better today than it did then. That "dammed spot," that blood soaked stain in our life just won't go away.

THE POWER OF HUMILITY

This morning I want to suggest that we've been concentrating on the wrong body part! It's not our hands that need to be washed. It's our feet!

In Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ", as Pilate is trying to wash his hands of this matter, the camera focuses in on the wash basin and then there is a flashback to a scene from earlier in the week.

Jesus is ceremonially washing his hands with his disciples as they are preparing to eat the Passover meal together, what came to be known as the Last Supper. As we know, in that meal he spoke about this cup of suffering that he would endure, body broken and blood shed.

That was effective, but I think it would have been even more effective had this scene included a flashback to the Last Supper as portrayed in John's gospel, when Jesus girded himself with a towel, poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciple's feet. In doing this Jesus illustrated the essence of God's otherworldly kingdom.

The kingdom of God in Jesus Christ isn't about power politics and putting the blame on others. It isn't about hand washing.

The kingdom of God is about the power of grace. The kingdom of God is about having our feet washed by the hands of the Savior. The kingdom of God is about learning the power of humility.

The contrast between Jesus and Pilate is complete. Instead of blaming others Jesus takes the sins of others upon himself. Instead of killing those who would get in his way, Jesus willingly dies for his the salvation of his enemies.

A PECULIAR ANSWER

After the attacks of September 11, they even wanted to interview ministers to get some perspective on this cataclysmic event. One of the people they chose was Tom Long, my old professor of preaching. Tom was on a radio show with other religious leaders, and host began by asking him,

"Dr. Long you are a pastor. What does the Christian faith say about these terrible acts?"

Long gave the standard Christian answer. He said something like,

"Our faith teaches us that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness, but that Jesus died to save sinners. In every situation the Christian faith teaches us to look for God's will, to seek reconciliation and redemption. We can understand evil because our faith teaches us that we commit evil."

The host turned to the next religious leader on the program, a man who was a representative of another great religion. The guest began by saying,

"Let me just say that I think that what the pastor just said was one of the worst things I have ever heard. The people who did this were inhuman and evil. We need to find them and punish them without any of this redemption business."

Tom said that at this moment it struck him how very odd it seemed to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in a time of violence. So many people wanted a crucifixion; so many people wanted to find someone to blame and punish. And here was my professor talking about the evil in our own hearts.

How peculiar.

But, that's the difference between the kingdom based on hand washing and the kingdom based on foot washing. That's the difference between being a part of the world's kingdom and being a part of that "otherworldly" kingdom that Jesus represents.

The kingdom of God is about a grace so deep that we can dare to humbly admit our shortcomings and serve others in His name. The kingdom of God is about a love so wide that it refuses to entertain violence as an option.

KING JESUS

So today we leave Pilate attempting to wash his hands while Jesus remembers washing his disciple's feet. Two basins of water representing two totally different ways of looking at things.

We know, of course, what happens next. The contrast between God's way and the way of Rome become even clearer. Jesus is beaten half to death by the Roman soldiers, and then he is mocked by the powers that be.

The mock coronation is more than cruel ridicule. It is symbolic of the clash between these two kingdoms. At first it looks like the world will win. But, if you look more closely you will see a different story.

Ironically, King Jesus was ruling even as they killed him. His brokenness was not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. Later all would see the power of God in Jesus through the resurrection. Later we will understand the words of the prophet, "by his wounds we are healed."

But, now all looks hopeless. A just man will be crucified. Pilate's own wife has seen the horrible truth in a dream and warns her husband not to become involved in this affair.

But, Pilate cannot do it. Pilate is too much a creature of the world. All he knows is the brute application of power and politics. In the end it will not be enough to stand against the power of God in Christ.

GOD IS LOVE

.As you walk the way of the cross with Jesus this week, think about the ways that you have tried to wash your hands of Jesus.

Perhaps you have sought salvation in some other way than the way of humility and self-sacrifice. Perhaps you have compromised one time too many. Perhaps you have not listened to that voice of warning when you were about to do the wrong thing.

Whatever your fault, Jesus has the cure. Humbly he seeks to serve you even as He served those first disciples. We may try to wash our hands of Jesus, but Jesus will never seek to wash his hands of us. In his blood shed we can still find redemption.

A famous preacher once said that it was not proper to say "love is God." If we say it that way we can just fill in the blanks with what we want to believe. No, we must say it the other way round. God is love. The God revealed in his Son, Jesus is love, and this week we are reminded once again that love takes the shape of a cross.

May God teach us once again the deep meaning of that love.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN