

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
Maundy Thursday Service 3/20/08
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

Scripture: John, Chapters 18 and 19

WHO IS ON TRIAL?

This evening I have chosen to tell the story of the Passion as it occurs in the gospel of John. And I want us to look at this rather long passage through the lens of a single question. Who is on trial?

Now that seems like an absurdly simple question. Obviously, Jesus is on trial. He is the one being judged by the Jews and by Pilate.

But, John skillfully uses the story of the Passion to suggest that Jesus is not really the one on trial. Jesus is in fact the king of the Jews, the Savior of the world. And no one, not even the most powerful people in the land can change that fact. Jesus is in control despite evidence to the contrary.

Even when the worst happens Jesus is still in command of his own destiny. Jesus “rules” from the cross. Though he is alone and totally without power, at no point in John’s story does Jesus seem weak. Ironically, in John’s gospel the more events spiral out of control the more Jesus seems to be in control.

The same cannot be said for the other actors in this drama. The disciples, the political leaders and the religious leaders are all tested by their encounters with Jesus and they all fail the test. The disciples deny their faith, the religious leaders lose faith, and the political leaders lose power.

DISCIPLES

The trial begins with the disciples. When the authorities come to arrest Jesus, impetuous Simon Peter’s first reaction is to pull his sword and attack. But, Jesus tells Peter to put away his sword. Jesus told his disciples many times that his kingdom was not about swords and revenge, that those who lived by the sword died by the sword.

But, when the time of testing came, Peter failed the examination. The first thing he did was reach for a sword.

Can we really blame Peter? When we feel threatened by our enemies isn't that our first reaction? Of course it is. But, Jesus tells us that if we rely too much on the sword, if we live by the sword, we disobey Jesus ... and more than that, we go down a path that invites disaster.

Jesus told Peter to put away his sword. And Peter obeyed.

But, Peter must have felt helpless without that sword. And so as Jesus confidently confronted the hostile questions of religious leaders, three times bold Peter denied even knowing Jesus.

It's easy to say that we know Jesus when we hold the sword, when we feel that we are in control and have power. But, what happens when Jesus tells us to put the sword away? Can we trust in the plans and promises of God when things seem to be getting out of control, and we have no sword to protect us?

For Peter and the rest of the disciples the answer was no. They ran away; they denied that they even knew Jesus.

PILATE

In the next scene, the religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate, supposedly the supreme political power in the land. But, immediately we see that this is not so.

The leaders do not want to enter Pilate's home because they believed that entering the home of a Gentile would render them impure for Passover. So, Pilate the supreme politician in the land is forced to meet the religious leaders outside.

Pilate asks what charges they are bringing against Jesus, and the religious leaders reply rather impudently, "If this man wasn't a criminal, we wouldn't have brought him to you."

Now Pilate is being tried. Will he stand up to the challenge of these troublesome religious leaders or will he pass the buck? Will he do the right thing or will he do the politically expedient thing?

Pilate tries to pass the buck. First, he tells the religious leaders that if this guy is such a problem, take care of it. Judge him yourself. But, Pilate strikes out on that ploy. They want Jesus killed, and only Pilate has the authority to have someone executed.

So, Pilate does what the religious leaders tell him to do. He brings Jesus into his palace and attempts to judge him. Even though the religious leaders didn't give him much to go on, Pilate apparently had already heard something about Jesus. Some said that he was the Messiah, the king of the Jews.

So Pilate gets right to the point. He asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" But, poor Pilate is the Rodney Dangerfield of political leaders. He just doesn't get any respect. Jesus answers his question with a question of his own, "Do you ask this on your own or did others talk to you about me?"

You can hear the anger in Pilate's voice when he replies, "I don't know what you Jews want. Your own people tell me that you've done something wrong. What have you done?"

And Jesus tells the greatest political power in the land, "My kingdom is not of this world." Pilate thinks that he's getting somewhere in his interrogation and exclaims, "So, you are a king?"

Jesus replies, "I am a king, but my kingdom is not built on false campaign promises. My kingdom is built upon the truth, God's truth."

WHAT IS TRUTH?

When you tell a politician like Pilate that it's important to tell the truth, they get that deer in the headlights look. And then they almost always suggest that truth is a relative thing. Pilate was no different. He mocks the idea that there might be some truth, some absolute principle by which the world is governed. He asks out loud to no one in particular, "What is truth?"

Pilate is judged by his own question. Jesus, the very essence of truth is standing right next to Pilate, but Pilate is blinded and judged by a desire to obtain and retain power. For Pilate truth is never absolute. For Pilate there is no truth with a capital "T." There are only small truths that are very much dependent upon how the political winds are blowing that day.

We know about that don't we? We know that politicians are often not interested in telling us the truth. With rare exceptions politicians are interested in telling us what we want to hear so that they can remain in power. It seems like the powerful are willing to say or do anything in order to stay in power.

Unfortunately for the politicians as we've seen recently in the news truth has a way of coming out. The truth often comes out even when politicians desperately try to hide it. And the same is true for us as well. In the presence of Jesus all that is false in us becomes immediately apparent. We cannot escape judgment by trying to change the rules in the middle of the game.

I think that Pilate understood that Jesus was a man who told the truth. He finally got up enough courage to say much to the religious leaders. Pilate told them, "I find no basis for a charge against this man."

RULED BY FEAR

If Pilate had stopped with that statement Jesus would have never been charged. But, Pilate the consummate politician gauged truth according to the latest public opinion polls. He went outside to get the results from his current focus group.

He said, "To show you what a nice guy I am I'm going to give you a choice. Do you want me to release this man, Jesus with whom I find no fault or do you want to release the hardened criminal Barabbas who was part of rebellion?"

The results of the poll are not even close. They all shouted, "Give us Barabbas!"

Pilate was not about to go against this strong a public opinion poll, but he still had one more trick up his sleeve. He had Jesus flogged and humiliated. The soldiers put a twisted crown of thorns on Jesus' head, a purple robe on his beaten back and cried out in derision, "Hail, O king of the Jews!" even as they punched him.

Pilate brought the beaten and humiliated Jesus before the people again. Again Pilate told the truth that he was trying so hard to escape. "I find no fault with Jesus." The crowd was having none of it. As soon as the religious leaders saw Jesus they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!"

Pilate tried to escape responsibility for the decision once again. He told the angry leaders, "You take him and crucify him." But, the insistent leaders said, "He claims to be the Son of God. In our country that's a crime punishable by death."

The Scripture tell us that when Pilate heard this he was "even more afraid."

This statement gives us insight into why Pilate made the decisions that he made. He was afraid. Pilate ruled by fear, and he ruled out of fear. Pilate's decisions were not his own. They were decisions dictated by fear and political expediency.

That's nothing new for a politician. The amazing thing is that Pilate has such a long struggle when it came to making a final decision about Jesus. Pilate doesn't know what to do about Jesus, and Jesus is not making things any easier for Pilate either.

A RULER WITHOUT POWER

Pilate brings Jesus inside his home once again and attempts to question Jesus. But, Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's questions. Out of frustration Pilate asks Jesus, "Don't you know I have the power to set you free or crucify you?"

And Jesus answered in a way that must have haunted Pilate the rest of his life. Jesus said, "You wouldn't have any power over me unless God gave it to you."

Once more Pilate tries to regain control of the situation and set Jesus free, but the religious leaders will have none of it. They say over and over again, "Don't you agree that Caesar is our rightful Lord. If you let this man continue going around claiming to be a king then you're no friend of Caesar."

Several more times Pilate tries to free Jesus, asking “shall I crucify your king?” but each time the echo rings from the crowd of leaders, “We have no king but Caesar.”

What a strange path we follow once we decide to let popular opinion determine what is right and wrong. In order to get rid of Jesus the religious leaders were even willing to say something that bordered on blasphemous, “Caesar is king.” Those who judged Jesus to be a heretic are now for their own political goals attributing power and divine sanction to their sworn enemy.

The powerful politician is shown to be a sniveling coward, and the religious leaders are shown to be opportunists who will swear allegiance to anyone who will give them what they want. The disciples are too busy hiding to tell anybody anything.

And Truth and true religion are discarded in the process.

Pilate finally gives in to his own fears and the fears of the religious leaders. He has Jesus crucified.

CRUCIFIXION

Crucifixion was a horrible death. In a sense it is quite odd that we wear gold crosses around our necks. It’s just like wearing a little gold electric chair around our neck.

C. S. Lewis noted that the crucifixion did not become common theme in art until all who had seen a real one had died off. The cross is perhaps the most brutal way to kill a person that has ever been devised by humanity.

And yet the Bible tells us that on the cross it is not Jesus who is put on trial and executed. It is all the powers that be. And on the cross the powers that be are not judged to be so powerful after all.

The Apostle Paul would later write something very curious about the crucifixion of Jesus. He wrote, “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

What could this mean? How could this terrible death be considered a victory in any way? How could such a spectacular defeat be transformed into a symbol of salvation?

In our own era I think of all those protesters in the civil rights movement. In Selma we watched in horror as the police treated them shamefully and let the dogs loose on them.

But, in that moment something changed. The powers that be were shamed and disarmed by their own lawlessness. The victory for civil rights began when innocent people were treated as criminals.

In a greater way the cross was a moment when evil was judged and defeated by its own excesses. Pilate and the religious leaders thought they were judging Jesus. But, in fact they were judging themselves. The bankruptcy of their politics and their religion was hammered to that cross. Every time they struck Jesus they were striking a blow against their own unjust ways.

IT IS FINISHED

In John's gospel as Jesus dies he says, "It is finished!" What does Jesus mean by that? What is finished? Is it a cry of relief as death finally comes?

No, it is a shout of triumph. History was changed forever by the victory of the cross. In a few days the disciples who ran away and denied their Lord will confront the risen Lord, and ever so slowly it begins to dawn on them. God in Jesus had chosen the way of weakness. God in Jesus was willing to forsake power in favor of love.

Philip Yancey summed it up well. He wrote, "Power no matter how well intentioned tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced the one for the sake of the other."

JUDGED BY THE CROSS TODAY

Tonight we think of those who were judged by the cross. The disciples were cowardly. The religious leaders were hypocritical and vicious. The politician was willing to do anything to keep his job and tamp down

rebellion. Their desire to hang onto power and life did indeed cause suffering.

But, we don't celebrate Holy Week to continuously criticize and judge the acts of disciples, religious leaders and politicians who died long ago. We celebrate Holy Week because on the cross we come face to face with our own sinfulness and our own shameful ways.

We are also judged by that cross. And as Jesus breaths his last we must take our place beneath the cross in order to understand personally both the judgment and the salvation that come from that terrible symbol of hope.

Barbara Brown Taylor told of going to a retreat once when the leader asked them to think of someone who represented Christ in their lives. When it came time to share their answers, one woman stood up and said, "I had to think hard about this one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it that told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'"

My theology professor wrote a book entitled Christian Doctrine in the late 1960s. Commenting on this passage he talked about the contrast between the claims of Jesus and the terrible things that were happening in the world at that time ... the Vietnam War, a man who killed his wife, children and finally himself in an act of desperation. He continued on with a description of other events that were in the news that day long ago.

And then he wrote, "When you read this, the news will be different, but it will be the same." And he was right wasn't he? The war is in a different place but there is still war, the tragedies have different names attached to them but they still lead on page one. In some ways the news of yesterday seems much like the news of today.

We might claim that Jesus is Lord, but an objective look at our world makes it seem like no one is in charge. In such a world we are tempted to join Pilate in his cynical approach to life. What is truth in a world like this? There is only political expediency.

Faith is certainly not seen as a priority. Christian faith, the world tells us is fine as long as it is kept in its place, a personal and private thing not related to the world as we know it. The movers and shakers tell us, "Stay out of politics little Christians. You'll be crushed by the powers that be. You need

to leave running the world to the real ‘kings.’ We’ll crucify you if you try to take our power away.”

The Kingdom of God is a joke for many in our world today, and Jesus seemed like a fine joke to Pilate as well. When he finally went along with the crucifixion, Pilate put a sign over Jesus on the cross. It read, “King of the Jews.”

The Jewish leaders were outraged. What kind of king is beaten and crucified? That was Pilate’s point of course. He thought that he could get rid of Jesus and make fun of the Jewish leaders at the same time.

But, it turns out that the joke was on Pilate and all who think that the Truth of God can be killed off so easily. In just a few days we will tell the rest of the story.

But, this evening we pause to remember that salvation never comes easily or cheaply. It comes with body broken and blood shed. The words are never easy to say because if we know the truth, we know that there is betrayal and cowardice in our own hearts as well.

Jesus knows. Jesus knows the truth about us just as he knew the truth about Peter and Pilate and all the religious leaders of his day. He wanted to embrace them even though they would betray and kill him. But, in a strange twist, their very acts of betrayal are used by God to bring salvation to the whole world.

The story we tell this evening is a realistic story. It tells the hard truth about all of us. But, is also a story of hope. This evening we remember once again that the King of the Universe, the Son of God takes our sins and crucifies them on the Cross of Calvary.

The last line of one of the hymns that we will sing this evening, Beneath the Cross of Jesus, puts it well. It goes,

“Upon the cross of Jesus
Mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of One
Who suffered there for me;
And from my stricken heart with tears

Two wonders I confess;
The wonders of redeeming love
And my unworthiness.”

May God help us see the cross more clearly.
Amen.