

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, April 14, 2019 – Lent 6

Hymns: 218 – Hosanna, Loud Hosanna; 214 - All Glory, Laud and Honour;  
217 – Ride On, Ride On In Majesty

Scripture: Matthew 27:11-26

Sermon Title: Pilate's Choice (Rev. Douglas Rollwage)

*Matthew 27:11-26 (NIV)*

*Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"*

*"You have said so," Jesus replied.*

*When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.*

*Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.*

*While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."*

*But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.*

*"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.*

*"Barabbas," they answered.*

*"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked.*

*They all answered, "Crucify him!"*

*"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.*

*But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"*

*When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"*

*All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!"*

*Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.*

Pontius Pilate was a nasty piece of work. He was famous, even in his own day, for anti-Semitic attitudes, brutal insensitivity and a readiness to employ a bloody solution to even minor problems. Not that the Romans didn't know this when appointing him to the job; they needed just that kind of relentless sorehead to deal

with a tough situation, and the Middle East was, then as now, a tough situation, filled to the brim with rebels and zealots and brigands and an endless list of folks with hatred for Rome. Pilate was used to dealing with such things, and his manner of dealing with them usually involved a whip at the least and a cross more often than not, all the better to make an example of such fools. So it is a little bit puzzling to see him waffling to and fro, back and forth, when Jesus stands before him, one more in a long line of troublemakers, but this time, maybe for the first time, Pilate can't figure this one out, can't seem to decide what to do, and the indecision of this most decisive of men becomes that for which he is best remembered. Writer Frederick Buechner tells us why:

*As the Roman governor, Pilate had the last word. He could have saved Jesus if he wanted to, and all indications are that for various reasons that's what he'd like to have done.*

*In the first place, after personally interrogating him, he decided that no wrong had been done and said so. "I find no crime in this man," he told the chief priests. Period. Maybe the man had committed some religious "faux pas" in their eyes, but the religion of the Jews was nothing to him, and he couldn't have cared less.*

*In the second place, on the basis of a troubling dream she'd had, Pilate's wife begged him "to have nothing to do with that righteous man," and, sophisticated or not sophisticated, that gave him pause. A woman's intuition was not something you sneezed at, especially if you happened to be married to her.*

*In the third place, his main job as a colonial administrator was to keep peace in the colonies at any price, and the last thing he wanted to do was to stir up a hornet's nest by making a martyr out of some local hero.*

*Nevertheless, when it became clear that he would stir up an even nastier hornet's nest by setting the man free, and when, in addition to that, the priests pointed out that no true friend of Caesar's would ever be soft on a man who set himself up as King to rival Caesar, Pilate prudently gave in to the pressures and said "go ahead and crucify him" if that's what they had their hearts set on.*

*To make it perfectly clear that he wanted no part in the dirty business, however, he said, "I am innocent of this man's blood," and as a dramatic gesture that not even the dullest among them could fail to understand, stepped out in front of the crowd and went through a ritual hand-washing in a basin of water he'd had them fill especially for that purpose. And in a sense he was right. Insofar as he'd done all he reasonably could to save the man - even offering to let them crucify Barabbas instead if it was just a show they were after - he was, in a manner of speaking, innocent. The crucifixion took place*

*against his advice and better judgment.*

Many commentators tell us that's the message the Gospels are trying to send – to appeal to a Roman audience by letting Pilate off the hook, and setting the blame solely at the doorstep of the priests, the Temple officials, and the mob. I suppose this might work, if Pilate was a beloved character, a kind of Roman everyman, someone for whom the ancient world had fond memories. Such commentators imply that if you were to make a Bible movie, you'd cast Tom Hanks as Pilate. Everybody loves Tom Hanks. There's Tom there, washing his hands, poor fellow. He did what he could.

Trouble is, Tom just doesn't fit the mold. Pilate was no beloved soul. By the time the Gospels were written, Pilate was long gone, recalled to Rome within a few years of the Crucifixion, for "excessive harshness and cruelty," no less. Not for the death of Jesus; Rome didn't much care about that. No, Pilate's brutality had finally culminated in his ordering the wholesale slaughter of Samaritans, during a minor revolt. And let me tell you, if the iron-fisted Romans depose you from your post as Prefect for excessive cruelty in suppressing a revolt, then by golly you've done things that are not worth even trying to think about in church. By the time the Gospels are written down, Pilate is long gone, with only the bad taste remaining.

*"The crucifixion took place against his advice and better judgment?"* No. The crucifixion took place because Pilate couldn't be bothered to do the right thing. Back to Frederick Buechner:

*Pilate's failing was not so much the terrible thing he'd done as the wonderful thing he'd proved incapable of doing. He could have stuck to his guns and resisted the pressure and told the chief priests to take a nice long hike. He could have spared Jesus' life. Or of that is asking too much, he could have spared him at least the scourging and the catcalls and the appalling way he died. Or if that is still asking too much, he could have spoken some word of comfort when there was nobody else in the world with either the chance or the courage to speak it. He could have shaken Jesus' hand. He could have said goodbye. He could have made some two-bit gesture which, even if it made no ultimate difference, to him would have made all the difference.*

*But he didn't do it, he didn't do it, and on that basis alone you can almost believe the sad old legend is true, that again and again his body rises to the surface of a mountain lake and goes through the motion of washing its hands as he tries to cleanse himself not of something he'd done, for which God could forgive him, but of something he might have done but hadn't, for which he could never forgive himself.*

Ah, Pilate. The traditional prayer of confession to begin a service of worship includes praying forgiveness for “the deeds which I have done, and that I have failed to do.” Where it all, for Pilate, hits home. He could have written that prayer, could Pilate: “forgive me, God, for the deeds which I have done, and that I have failed to do.”

“That I have failed to do.” Pilate’s failure is one of letting others take the responsibility for his actions, of letting others set the agenda for his life, of letting others decide for him about Jesus. He let the situation get the better of him, he let his many outside pressures override his (admittedly calloused) inner sense of right and wrong. He makes Jesus someone else’s, anyone else’s responsibility. He, despite somehow knowing there was more to this man than met the eye, indeed much more, nonetheless washes his hands not only of his responsibility but of his opportunity. “I have done nothing wrong as regards this man,” Pilate tells the crowd, tells himself, tells God, maybe, washing, washing his hands. But Pilate, what have you done right?

He makes his choice, does Pilate. And his choice is to say, “Choosing is not my responsibility. It’s yours.” And he washes his hands. And you know, in one respect, he’s right. Choosing is our responsibility. Because the choice is still there, and it’s there for us to make.

The choice is to choose Jesus, or to reject Jesus. Ultimately, those are the choices. To choose Jesus means to actually choose, to make a choice, and not to let circumstances make that choice for you. To choose Jesus means to choose to live your life in the implications of that choice, to live as though that choice makes all the difference to you and to the world, as surely it does. To choose Jesus, to choose the path of new life which Jesus provides, is to choose to live as though the needs of others were more important than your own, to live as though there are values beyond the situation of our own greatest convenience. To choose Jesus means to make all of our choices in the light of that one choice, for to choose Jesus means to choose to live as a child of God, as a brother, as a sister of Christ, to live as we were created, called, and empowered to live. This is our choice, and it is a choice. It is a decision.

To choose not to choose, and to choose to reject, are one and the same, as the life and story of Pilate so eloquently demonstrate. Despite all of his very legitimate extenuating circumstances, despite the pressures near and far, still deep down inside he knew. He knew it well enough to fear it within himself; he became, we read, “all the more afraid.” He tried to get the priests to choose, Herod to choose, the crowd to choose, even the whip and scourge to choose. But it still (as it does for all of us), came back to him. And he chose not to choose. He washed his hands of the whole

affair. And in his failure to choose, it was he who stood and watched as Jesus - battered, beaten, crowned with thorns - staggered under the weight of the cross, and slowly, stumbling, step by bleeding step, trod the path of our salvation.

To choose to follow Jesus is a choice we make every day. Because every day, we are called to make choices. Every day, we are called to choose. To choose between resentment and forgiveness. To choose between criticism and support. To choose between uncaring words, and words of kindness. To choose between selfishness and generosity. Between ignoring and helping. Between turning our back and lending a hand. Between keeping our faith a secret, and extending an invitation. Between loving and doing nothing at all. We are called to choose. Like Pilate, we are called to choose.

When we read the story of Pilate, we need to read as though this were not some unknowable Roman in an unimaginable place, an uncountable number of years ago. No, when we read the story of Pilate, it is us standing there; we, under pressures from without and within, from work and from home; we, beset by doubts and uncertainties, conflicted and alone; we who would decide, who must decide, and yet, waffling, will try not to decide at all. When we read the story of Pilate, we need to think, “Wait a minute, that’s me, that’s me, that’s me making the decision. That’s me making the choice. That’s me failing to choose at all.”

But we don’t have to fail. We can choose. We can choose to say Yes to God, as he reveals his love and forgiveness to us in Jesus Christ. We can say Yes, and ask God to forgive us, to cleanse us, to help us start fresh, to live anew. We, like Pilate, have Jesus standing before us, here, now, and we can choose to wash our hands of him, or we can choose to reach out our hands to him, open our hearts, and acknowledge him as Saviour and Lord. We can choose to follow. We can choose. We must choose. And the moment to choose is now.

“For the deeds that I have done, and for those I have failed to do – for the choices I have made, and those I have failed to make.” May our lives not be known for deeds not done, choices not made. May God help each of us, every day of our lives, to choose the way of Jesus, to choose the path of Christ, to do the deeds of God, and so by the grace of God make a difference in our lost and hurting world. Amen.

*(Quotations from Frederick Buechner are from his wonderful book, “Peculiar Treasures – A Biblical Who’s Who” – Harper and Row, 1979. Buechner, with insight, humour and skill, treats us to brief personality profiles of over 100 Biblical characters, from Aaron to Zaccheus. Highly recommended!)*

