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John 18: 28-40

Jesus before Pilate

28 Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' ³⁰They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' ³¹Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' ³²(This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' ³⁴Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' ³⁵Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' ³⁶Jesus answered, '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.' ³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' ³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

Jesus Sentenced to Death

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ⁴⁰They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.

I'm sure it started out innocently enough. The Romans had conquered Judea, they controlled the economy, the government, and communication networks. Inevitably, they exerted their dominance over the religious life of the Jewish people as well. The Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, composed of

their chief priests, the Sadducees, scribes, and leaders, decided that they had to do the best they could under the circumstances. They accommodated to the Romans. They followed their directives in an effort to keep the peace, and prevent further violence.

It's possible over time that this relationship became mutually beneficial. The Roman governor, Pilate, would let the Sanhedrin alone as long as they kept to their business, didn't disrupt the peace of Jerusalem, and did as they were told. In exchange, the Sanhedrin gained a protected place of privilege, their status guarded by the Romans, their livelihood as the religious leaders of the people secure.

So when along came this rogue rabbi from Nazareth who scoured the Temple of the money-changers, flipped tables, whipped the animals into a frenzy, and further, claimed to be the Son of God, who is one with the Father, they had a problem on their hands. He threatened to upset the delicate balance of power and comfortable position they had gained under Roman rule. The timing was also problematic, as Jews gathered from far and wide to celebrate the Passover. The Passover remembered and celebrated when God liberated the Jewish slaves from Egypt and used Moses to bring them to the Promised land. This Jesus of Nazareth was on the scene when tensions with the Romans were at a fever-pitch. They needed to get this situation with Jesus under control, before the whole thing got out of control, and the Romans cracked down with excessive force.

I'm sure it all sounded rational in their minds. Even though this Jesus had done wondrous things – he was said to have healed the blind, and caused the dead to rise – he had also blasphemed, calling himself the Son of God, if not God. If they didn't act soon, his movement might erupt into rebellion. If that happened, the Romans would respond with brutal force. Thousands would die. Not only that, the Romans might take the disturbance as an opportunity to blame the Sanhedrin, and purge them all from their positions. There was a lot at stake: Their comfortable lifestyles, their livelihoods, and their role safeguarding the safety of their people. They needed to do something. So they paid one of his companions to betray him, they arrested him in the Garden at night when he wasn't prepared. And now, due to the restraints of their religion – it being the day of preparation for the Passover - they brought him to Pilate to be killed.

Yes, I'm sure it all sounded reasonable and rational in their minds. But they had it wrong didn't they? The Sanhedrin and the Romans both feared a revolution. A revolution that would bring swords, spears, chariots, and destruction. They feared a Jewish king would arise to lead the people in a violent uprising that would establish an independent kingdom. A kingdom of Jews, free from the oppression of the Romans. But the revolution that Jesus was bringing was not a military one. It was not established or crafted in violence. It was a kingdom totally unlike any imagined. As Jesus tells Pilate, "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." (18: 36).

You can see Pilate struggle to comprehend this, "So you are a king?" he asks. Jesus' answer is enigmatic, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'" (18: 37-38).

The Sanhedrin and Pilate, both struggling to comprehend this Jesus. Both misunderstanding his mission. Both seeking to prevent the establishment of a kingdom that was never meant to be. Both operating out of a system of beliefs that worked very well for navigating their way through the earthly kingdom of the Romans, but was incapable of navigating the Kingdom of God.

And it's these two kingdoms that are still at work today: The kingdom of the Romans – call it the kingdom of the world – and the Kingdom of God. We are still moving between the two in our lives each day. We are still missing out on the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Let me illustrate. One of the places we misapprehend the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world is in culture and politics. As Christians we have a unique calling as people of Christ. We are called to be in culture, but not of culture. We are set apart by our unique calling, which is the greatest commandment to love God and love neighbor. This commandment supersedes all other earthly demands. We also owe allegiance to God in Jesus Christ above any earthly allegiance. Therefore, as Christians living in the world, we have a precarious place to occupy; we face many difficulties. We need to be wary.

Here's the trap we can fall into: Maybe you're discouraged by the state of political discourse that we've fallen into these past few years. We seem to be a

divided nation: liberals and conservatives, the left and the right, Democrats and Republicans. There are any number of issues that deeply divide us, gun control, immigration, abortion, healthcare, economics... the list goes on. The trap in the midst of all of this is that we begin to put these causes and these allegiances above our allegiance to Jesus. We begin to define ourselves by our political identity. "I am a Democrat." "I am a Republican." Or we identify around another cause we champion.

Now, it's important to have a cause to believe in. It's important to be politically active and vote – we have a participative democracy. But tell me if this isn't true, and does not happen all the time: We begin to see the cause as paramount. We see that we need to do all we can to achieve our goals. So we begin to accommodate to the kingdom of the world a bit here and there, because the ends justify the means, and loyalty to the cause means everything. So we begin to overlook the wrongs perpetrated by our political heroes, and exaggerate and draw a hyper focus on the ones by our political enemies. We begin to surround ourselves with like-minded individuals who support and encourage our views, while we do everything we can to tune out and dismiss those with differing viewpoints.

Pretty soon we have an echo chamber around ourselves that makes it easy to rationalize our behaviors, because they're being amplified and encouraged by the voices around us. Soon, we've reached a tipping point and we can rationalize some pretty outrageous behavior, because we have to make sure that the cause is protected and advanced, or those other guys will have their way with us. It may be even, that we find ourselves doing things that are outrageous, or hurtful, or morally bankrupt because we've so far lost the path that we've lost all perspective of good and bad, right and wrong.

We are at a dangerous and maybe unprecedented place in our culture at the moment. Florida senator, Marco Rubio, described the problem when he told of how we only listen to channels that reinforce our already held beliefs. We stop speaking to people, friends, family even, that have different political beliefs than our own. We can't even have a civil conversation about important matters anymore without it becoming heated. Political pundit and historian Glenn Beck even went so far as to compare it to 1920s Germany, the Weimar Republic, in the

years before the Nazis came to power. In those days there were two major newspapers controlled, one each, by the right and the left. The same news event would be reported radically differently in one paper or the other, given a slant or spin, based on which you read. The culture was fracturing and dividing, and the seeds were being sown for the tragedy of the coming decades.¹ But in the midst of that time, each side was deepening its position, entrenching its ideology, rationalizing its behavior. Are we falling prey to this same phenomenon? Are we finding ourselves on the same path? Where will this lead us?

We might even find ourselves the Sanhedrin, rationalizing turning this rogue rabbi-prophet over to the Romans to take care of before things get out of hand. We rationalize that one life is worth sacrificing for the good of all. And pretty soon we're right there with the crowd in Pilate's courtyard that day, chanting, "Not this man, but Barabbas!"

God help us.

We think we're better than the Sanhedrin. We think we're more enlightened. We think we've come so far in the years since. But are we? Have we? What are we doing to advance our pet causes that, in the light of our calling to love God and to love neighbor, is morally bankrupt? Where are we falling short of our Christian calling to unite, rather than divide; to reconcile, rather than vilify; to love, rather than to fear; to listen, rather than plug our ears and drown out the voice of the other; to work for justice, rather than languish in apathy?

Our calling as follower of Jesus is clear. As Jesus taught in Luke 16: 13, "You cannot serve God and wealth." With wealth being a stand-in for anything that is not God. We cannot put any cause in politics or culture above our faith in God in Jesus Christ. Even the most noble of seemingly innocuous causes that we might imagine like, "save the baby manatees," can become a corrupting influence when we place it above our calling in Christ. We're capable of making any idea, good in its inception, into an ideology. With an ideology in this context being a system of thoughts or beliefs that grows larger than itself and begins to demand unquestioning allegiance to its followers. Are there some dangerous ideologies in our world right now? I think there are.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naF7HinLQ_U. Accessed March 11, 2018.

We cannot fall into the trap of the Sanhedrin, where we lose sight of our higher calling and begin to accommodate to the Romans and the kingdoms of this world. So I ask us this morning, what does it look like for us to place Christ above culture? What does it look like for us to place Christ above all kingdoms of this world, above all ideologies? What does it look like for us to be Christians first, and all things behind? How does this commitment begin to affect the way we Democrats *differently*? Republicans *differently*? Committed to a particular cause *differently*?

Pilate, a master of, and mastered by, the ways of culture, war, power, and all the kingdoms of the world, was lost in a mess of his own making. Pilate was so blinded by these ways that he even asked Jesus, "what is truth?" For him, truth had become a tool to be manipulated and twisted and used to suit the aims of powers and kingdoms of the world. His life was so twisted and warped by this abuse of truth, that when the truth was standing right in front of him he could not see it with his own eyes. Friends, may we have the eyes to see, and the ears to hear the truth that was before Pilate that day, and is before us this day. That Jesus Christ is the "the way, and the truth, and the life." (John 14: 6). That he has a higher claim and calling on our lives than any crude political ambition or striving. May we seek to follow Christ in all things. May we place him and the work of his Kingdom above all else. May we follow him.

Alleluia and Amen.