

John 19:1-16a

1 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. 2 And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. 3 They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. 4 Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." 5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" 6 When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." 7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God." 8 Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. 9 He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. 10 Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." 12 From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor." 13 When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. 14 Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" 15 They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." 16 Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.


"Resemblance"

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Who do you take after? If you look at old family photos, who do you resemble? I look like a Cramer – my father's family. About 10 years ago I was back in SD for the wedding of a family friend where I was greeted by the father of one of my high school classmates. He said, "you look familiar. I don't know which one you are, but you are one of Delmar's girls." And I am. And, its pretty OK to be



recognized as one of Delmar's girls. My dad had a good reputation in the community and never met a stranger. He was the life of the party, always ready with a story or song, and always quick to help anyone in need – neighbor or stranger. I could do worse than resembling my father. But that isn't always the case is it. Nobody wants to go through the old family history and realize they bear a striking resemblance to the horse thief in the family tree. Given a choice, who would you like people to say you resemble?

I ask that question because we have a story today that is full of larger than life characters: Jesus; Pilate; the Religious Authorities; an Angry Crowd. As you consider all of them, I ask you again, who do you resemble?

All the way through the Gospel of John there is a pattern that emerges: all of these people (Nicodemus, The Samaritan Woman, Peter) have an encounter with Jesus that tells them a truth about themselves; but it is not the final truth; they all have a choice to make about how to proceed once they learn what they learn about themselves and about Jesus.

The same is true of Pilate. Jesus is on trial, but it is Pilate who is being tested: he questions Jesus, repeatedly; he finds him innocent of the charges against him; he is compelled by this person, and provides opportunities for his release; but when his position and power are threatened; he caves to the crowds demanding Jesus execution. He condemns an innocent man to death to preserve his own political position.

The religious leaders declare: "we have no king but the emperor." This is an outright betrayal of their declaration of faith as God's chosen people. It is blasphemy. But it is also true, because they have chosen the way of violence.

Servants of Caesar are known by their violence. Jesus says everyone will know his servants by their love.

We might wish to ask if this is so of us.

Does our testimony in word and deed reflect our citizenship in the alternate kingdom from above, where servants of the Beloved are nonviolent, vulnerable lovers of friend and foe? Or do our words and actions suggest that our first allegiance is to something else -- a nation or party or religious institution?

This passage is a dark moment. We get to see humanity at its worst, condemning an innocent man to death. We see that man flogged, and mocked, and ridiculed. We witness in this story a miscarriage of justice perpetrated by people like us.

This encounter with Jesus illuminates the potential within humanity – within *us* – to be cruel, and selfish, and vengeful. It reveals the potential for humanity – for *us* – to sacrifice our eternal souls for temporary comfort and security.

It is easy for us to sit in our reasonably comfortable pews, with our legally protected freedom of religion, in our predominantly Christian nation and declare that Jesus is our Lord and our King. But what happens when declaring Jesus our King begins to cost us something? What happens when living in a Kingdom way begins to hurt? Because, let me tell you something, loving our enemies hurts. Turning the other cheek instead of striking out in retaliation requires a painful level of restraint. Taking a stand for justice might cost us a great deal. Walking the way of peace may expose us to ridicule and scorn.

We call ourselves Christian, but when put to the test, who do we resemble?

We might bear a striking resemblance to Pilate. It certainly is a temptation for me. I understand Pilate all too well. Like him, I have a really choice position in a wonderful institution. And I'd like to keep it. And sometimes, the Gospel challenges me to take an unpopular position, or speak a truth people might not like to hear. Today might be one of those days. And I want you to like me. And if you like me, I'm more likely to keep my salary, and health insurance, and pension. I get why Pilate tried to walk the safe path.

While I'm self-disclosing, I'm pretty familiar with the position of the religious authorities as well. Besides the obvious that I am a religious authority, I have a vested interest in preserving this institution. I am well aware of what it would cost us to lose our tax exempt status, how it would effect our general budget if we were required to pay taxes on this property. There was a lot at stake for the religious authorities! When are you tempted to align yourself with the popular opinion so that you don't rock the boat in your family or your career? So you can stay under the radar? When are you tempted to choose self-preservation over faithfulness to the gospel?

There is danger in playing it safe. We may find ourselves perpetuating the injustice Jesus called us to resist. We may find ourselves ridiculing, scorning, and denying the one who came to save us.

Servants of Caesar are known by their violence. Jesus says everyone will know his servants by their love. I would rather be known for resembling Jesus.

Are you willing to love with the radical love of Jesus, even if it means making an unpopular stand for peace and justice? Are you willing to love with the radical love of Jesus, even if it means putting yourself in harm's way to protect another? Are you willing to choose mercy over judgement? Pilate wasn't.

I suspect we all have a line we aren't willing to cross: Lord, I will love you with my whole heart, as long as I don't have to _____. Think, for a minute, how you would fill in that blank. For Pilate it was losing his cushy government job. For the religious authorities it was safety from the Roman Empire. What is it for you?

We can do such damage to each other with our words and actions.

We humans are so good at perpetuating the darkness in our world.

But, listen. Did you hear what Jesus said to Pilate? I'm paraphrasing here, but he said something like: *you think you have the power over life and death, but you possess only the power I have given you; I have the power over life and death, and I choose to die rather than see one more of my children suffer a life of hopeless desperation.*

Jesus came for the broken: for the Pilates of the world who are thirsty for power at any price; for the religious leaders who are willing to swear their allegiance to country over their allegiance to God; for the faithful who cower in the shadows instead of taking a stand; for the innocent who are wrongly condemned. Jesus came for the broken, and here we are: in prisons; in hospitals; in schools; in neighborhoods; in churches. Here we are, Lord, your broken people who have denied you, hid from you, failed you more times than we can count.

But you love us. You love this broken, messy world full of broken, messy people. That's why you came. And with your last breaths, as you hung on a

cross, you forgave all of them – all of us – who have wronged you: “father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

We don't know all the ways we fail you, do we? But we are learning. We are learning, as your light illuminates our darkness, that we are not as loyal, faithful, compassionate, generous, patient, or kind as you would have us be. We are quick to anger and slow to forgive. We wield words as weapons instead of using them to build bridges. Here we are, Lord. You have revealed to us ourselves.

What will we do with that knowledge? Can you help us, Lord, to faithfully and courageously speak the truth of your light and love into the world? Can you help us, Lord, to walk the path of justice, humility, and compassion? Can you show us, Lord, how to use our hands, to build communities of love and acceptance? We are ready to come out of the shadows and live as your kingdom people. Its costing us too much not to change our ways. Can you help us, Lord, to resemble you? They will know we are your servants by our love.

May it be so. Amen.