

“Passion Sunday”

Series – Love Leads the Way, part 2

Mark 15:1-15

You are in the right place this morning. If it took an extra effort to come to worship today, that’s OK. Sometimes it takes three or four cups of coffee. Sometimes, you ask yourself, “Why am I doing this again?” Let me remind you. We are here to worship God and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We come to this place to draw strength from people who have decided to follow Jesus. This is a good place to be, not because anyone here is perfect, but precisely the opposite. None of us has it all together, and we need each other, and we need Jesus.

I invite you to pray with me this morning, with your palms open, ready to receive what God has for us. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, by whom all things were created, we need you this morning. We are your people, gathered in your name to praise you and worship you, and we need to hear your voice. Allow your truth to be preached. Show us that our choices matter. Teach us again how much you love us. And may you receive all the glory. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.

This past week in my History of Christianity class, my fellow seminarians and I got caught up in a discussion of the political leadership of the early United States. Specifically, we were talking about how the leaders in the 1700’s used their influence to protect religious freedom in our country, but failed to address the issue of slavery for nearly 100 years. At one point in the discussion, our professor asked if there were any similarities with our current national leadership today. One student pointed out that Presidents and congressional leaders today still have the ability to set the religious tone for the whole country.

I have never really understood politics, but I do get the fact that prominent leaders face enormous pressure from the public. The larger and louder the crowd, the more pressure there is on leaders to make decisions that will please some and anger others. Their integrity and wisdom is put to the test daily.

In the story of Jesus and Pilate, we see a leader that is under enormous pressure. Clearly, Pilate compromised in order to please the crowd. And while we can pick on Pilate, really, this story represents the choice we all have to make. How do we react under pressure from the crowd?

It's not that the crowd is always wrong. Remember on "Palm Sunday," the crowd cheered for Jesus and waved palm branches. They shouted, "Hosanna! God save us!" The people were looking for a messiah, and they had found Jesus. They were expecting Christ to save them from Rome - the oppressors who taxed them and prevented them from experiencing freedom.

But Jesus came to be a different type of Savior. He came, not with military power, but with spiritual power. He was a suffering servant who would save his people from their sins. That was not a great platform to inspire confidence in the people, unfortunately.

This week is called Passion Week, and although we won't read the whole story today, I hope that you take some time to reflect on all that Jesus went through in his last 24 hours before dying. Today, we are focusing specifically on his appearance before Pilate. So, how did Jesus arrive there in the first place?

Jesus, after he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, was condemned in an illegal trial by the Jewish authorities. But they decided not to kill him themselves. Rather, they chose to bring Jesus before the Romans, who could enforce a death sentence, if they could prove that Jesus was a traitor. So they

brought him before Pilate, the ruthless Roman governor of Judea, at a place called the Antonia Fortress.

In Jesus' day, the temple dominated the city of Jerusalem, and right next door was the Antonia Fortress, where the Roman barracks were. This surely irritated the Jews, having this reminder of their occupation that close to the center of their worship. I am sure it was intentional. The Romans weren't going to let the people forget who was in charge.

Try to visualize what Pilate saw and heard on this early Friday morning. Shouting. Roman soldiers. Angry Jewish mobs. People looking for blood. The Jewish priests had the crowd riled up pretty good. Now all they needed was Pilate to order Jesus' death.

The priests brought Jesus, bound hand and foot, to Pilate, claiming Jesus was trying to make himself king. Now this was a capital offense, a serious accusation that ended in death if found guilty. And Jesus stood silent before Pilate. By Roman law, if an accused person refused to speak, they were found guilty. Pilate admitted he had the power to free Jesus. Still, Jesus did not speak or defend himself. Pilate was amazed at Jesus' silence.

Hundreds of years before Jesus was ever born, Isaiah recorded these words:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

That is exactly what happened on this day in Jerusalem. Jesus didn't defend himself because he was determined to carry out God's plan. Jesus knew

that his death would save the world, although not the way the crowd wanted or expected.

What about Pilate, though? I don't believe he knew this scripture. But it is clear that Pilate saw through the Jewish leaders' plot. He knew that they were jealous and that Jesus was innocent. Pilate was in a difficult position. He had to stay in control. He had to be a strict governor. History tells us, he was already on thin ice with the emperor, and in AD 36, he was actually recalled to Rome. This was not a good time to show weakness.

Pilate thought he had a way out. He had a custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover – a token to appease the masses. He thought he could free Jesus by offering the crowd a choice. So Pilate pulled out a murderer from prison: a man named Barabbas. He was a convicted criminal, one who had fought for freedom from Rome. Barabbas was a killer, and Pilate expected that the people would condemn Barabbas and let Jesus go free.

But the scene did not play out as Pilate had hoped. The crowd poured their hatred and disappointment into Jesus. They wanted his blood. Now, truthfully, there were others in Jerusalem who did not want Jesus to die. But they didn't speak up, or they weren't there. That did not matter to Pilate. He had to deal with the crowd who was before him now.

To be perfectly honest, I am not sure how I feel about Pilate. On one hand, he was doing his job. He was supposed to govern Palestine and keep the peace with force if necessary. One could even claim that he was used by God to fulfill prophecy – Jesus himself had predicted his own death. I feel some sympathy for Pilate. He was between a rock and a hard place. It really appears that Pilate didn't want to kill Jesus.

But then I notice Mark 15:15: "Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified." Roman flogging was a terrible torture, using a whip with bones and metal embedded in the strands. Roman soldiers were so violent, often their victims would die before they even made it to the cross. Pilate showed no remorse for having Jesus beaten, and in the end, no remorse for Christ's death, either.

Pilate gave in to the demands of the crowd. Jesus, the Son of God, was substituted for the convicted criminal, Barabbas. Barabbas knew he was guilty. He admitted it. But Jesus took Barabbas' place. Jesus, an innocent man, took the punishment, while the guilty man went free.

That's a pretty powerful truth. We all have been spared, like Barabbas, for Jesus died in our place. Whether or not we admit our own sin, the truth is, Jesus never sinned, not even once, and he died the death of a convicted criminal.

Honestly, I can understand the desire of the crowd. They wanted to be free of Roman oppression. Barabbas represented the choice of somebody who was actually fighting for them. Maybe we don't like his methods, but at least he was doing something. Jesus, on the other hand, was telling the people to love their enemies, to carry the backpacks of the Roman soldiers an extra mile, to turn the cheek when they were insulted and abused, to fight hatred with love. Jesus in effect said, "Not by the power of the sword, but by the power of the cross." Jesus would change the world by his sacrificial love.

But on this day in Jerusalem, no one understood. No one chose to speak up for Christ. And the leader who admitted he had the ability to free Jesus instead chose to condemn him, even though his conscience was against it.

Pretend you were Pilate. What would you do? What would you say? Whom would you condemn, whom would you release? Here is a hypocritical crowd, on one hand wanting freedom from Rome, and on the other hand saying they have no king but Caesar. In front of you stand two men: one who teaches others to love your enemies and claims to have the power of God, yet refuses to show it; the other, a murderous rebel who will more than likely end up in prison again shortly. Whom would you free? Whom would you destroy?

The crowd wanted Barabbas. He was their hero. At least he did something they approved of, even though his methods were crude.

The force of the crowd is strong. They desire immediate results. The truth is, we are Pilate, wishing to appease the crowd at the expense of our own conscience, our own integrity. We are also the crowd, wanting quick and easy answers, claiming that the ends justify the means. We can even identify with Barabbas, because we are the ones who are guilty, who should have borne the punishment that Christ took upon himself.

But this message is not about guilt. Unlike Pilate, we know how the story ends. Jesus died to set us free. Isaiah 53:5 says it best,

"He was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his wounds we are healed."

One of the greatest reasons to gather together in church is to be in a crowd that wants the best for you. We draw strength when we worship together. Instead of being surrounded by a people bent against God's will, we are surrounded by those who want to follow Jesus. Instead of being leaders

pressured to submit and compromise, we are admitting our weakness to each other, forgiving each other, and holding each other accountable for our decisions.

I am glad I was not Pilate on that day. But I can also tell you an important truth. Jesus died to save the world. He died for Pilate. He died for Barabbas. He died for you and for me. Jesus died for every sin we ever committed, including every time we have gone along with the crowd. There is not one righteous person among us. We have all forsaken Jesus and ignored what he stood for. And yet, by the grace of God and the love of Jesus, we have forgiveness.

This is the beginning of Holy Week, when we have another chance to focus on what Jesus went through to save us. We have another chance to receive forgiveness for when we have followed the crowd, not listened to our conscience, and forsaken Christ. It is another chance to receive his love and grace anew, knowing it is not a cheap grace, but grace bought with the precious blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Memory verse

Hebrews 12:2 - Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Reflection questions

1. When have I been a part of the crowd?
2. When have I refused to speak up for the innocent at my own risk?
3. When have I chosen "might" over "right"? Violence over peace?
Harshness over gentleness?
4. When have I failed to recognize the God's truth in my life?
5. In light of what Jesus went through, what am I willing to do about any of those answers?