

We continue today in our series, “Were you there? Finding ourselves at the foot of the cross (Eric Kolbell).” We’re looking at some biblical characters found in the last days of Jesus’s life, as in their stories we so readily see our own (Kolbell). Today’s biblical character you may recognize from that little phrase ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate,’ as it has, from the beginning, been recited in the creeds of the Church. Like most of the characters we’ve studied these last few weeks, we don’t know much about Pilate from scripture; nonetheless, we know a little more about him from history. Although Pilate, “an obscure Roman governor of Judea, stepped onto the stage of human history for only four hours, his name is known to more people in the world than those of most of the great humans in history” (*Were You There? Seeing Yourself in the Drama of the Cross*, Tom Houston). A little background: Pilate was not a “high-born Roman.” He served in the army in Germany and during a prolonged stay in Rome, he met a woman and married up-really up. His wife, Claudia, was the granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus Caesar (Houston). Let’s just say that after marrying, he was very well connected and quickly moved up in rank and power. As a governor, “he was responsible for law and order, for the administration of justice and for the collection of taxes” (Houston). Pilate began this specific job about three years before where we pick up in today’s story. Some scholars claim that even though Pilate was charged to care for all the people as governor, he didn’t particularly care for the religious sensitivities of the Jewish people- which translated into not caring for them. For example, when Pilate came into Jerusalem for a festival, such as Passover, he wanted to “remind the Jews that Rome was in charge, so he intentionally allowed Roman troops to enter the city and approach the temple compound bearing the flag of the emperor (to the Jews, this was blasphemy). The people rose in revolt,

and he eventually removed the flag, but the psychological damage was done” (Kolbell). All four gospels show Pilate to be a weak-willed governor who does everything in his power to avoid having to rule on Jesus’ case. Even though Pilate is mentioned in all four gospels, today we will look more closely mainly at Luke’s portrayal of Pilate leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. But before turning to God’s Word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.** Luke 23:1-7; 11-25.

The assembly of chief priests and scribes- after bringing Jesus before council during the night- were up early to take Jesus and their three accusations against him to Pilate. Pilate asked Jesus about the third accusation. “Are you the king of the Jews?” and Jesus replied, “You say so” (v.3). Pilate declared Jesus innocent saying that he found no basis for an accusation against him (v.4). The assembly pushed back, insisting that Jesus was a troublemaker, stirring the people up with his teaching and potentially causing a riot. You may remember a few weeks ago when I preached on Caiaphas, the high priest, that Rome detested riots and insurrection. Not only did Caiaphas do whatever he could to prevent riots, so did Pilate. Pilate must’ve been listening carefully because when he heard Galilee, he quickly asked if that’s where Jesus was from. Trying to ditch the responsibility of rendering judgment, he sent Jesus to Herod because Galilee was in Herod’s jurisdiction. That’s called passing the buck. The assembly went with Jesus to Herod to make their case known. After mocking Jesus, Herod put Jesus in a royal robe and sent him back to Pilate. Interesting thing is that on that same day Herod and Pilate, who were known enemies, became fast friends- this was Luke’s calling out their “unholy collusion” (*Harper Collins Study Bible*).

Pilate said again for the second time that he didn't find Jesus guilty of any of their charges and neither did Herod. He said that Jesus had done nothing to deserve death (v. 15), yet he still offered to flog Jesus before letting him go. But the people weren't having it, and they began to shout with one voice to get rid of Jesus and to free Barabbas instead. Barabbas was in prison for a riot and for murder. According to both Matthew and Mark, it was tradition during Passover for the governor to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted (Mt. 27:15 and Mk. 15:6). The people knew of this custom, and they used it to condemn Jesus to death. Pilate went back and forth- three times- with the chief priests and the crowds- proclaiming Jesus' innocence yet offering to whip him- but they kept demanding with loud shouts that Jesus be crucified. Their loud voices wore Pilate down. Fear set in, and Pilate caved. He folded. Instead of leading the people; he let them lead him, and he handed Jesus over as they wished but according to the Gospel of Matthew, not before relinquishing all responsibility. Matthew says that, *when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves"* (27:24).

Denying responsibility for something you have the power to stop is the refuge of cowards. Pilate was all about Pilate and about saving himself. He knew what was just and yet he gave into fear and selfishly focused on his temporary power. Pilate blamed the chief priests and the crowds for finding Jesus guilty, yet he was the only one who could pronounce the death penalty. Like Caiaphas, Pilate didn't want to lose his job- he didn't want their riot on his hands. So, Pilate threw his

integrity out the window, and he handed Jesus over to be crucified. He washed his hands of the matter and blamed those who yelled, “Crucify him!” Putting the blame on someone else is the ultimate passing of the buck. Pilate may not have recognized it, and you and I may not always recognize it either, but that self-justifying, blaming others, begging off attitude brings to a person a moral paralysis that incapacitates them (Houston). The center of Pilate’s deception –where we perhaps see ourselves in Pilate – is the idea that we are not responsible – that somehow when things seem “so big,” we can just wash our hands of the matter. We wash our hands in the water of procrastination. We wash our hands in the water of idle excuses. We wash our hands in the water of “spacious philosophies that offer comfort but evade Christ’s commands” (Leslie D. Weatherhead, *Personalities of the Passion*). We tell ourselves that we see no other way, so we give up and give in to what we know is wrong. Like Pilate though, when we wash our hands, it does nothing to minimize our complicity. How much injustice do we allow because we’ve not committed one way or the other or we don’t like conflict or don’t want to take the heat or other selfish reasons?

Susan Stall, who worships here at Triune, invited me to join the first of several Faith in Action Zoom discussions, sponsored by Village Engage and United Way, this past Wednesday afternoon. There were various representatives from different faiths, and the discussion was on racial inequality. Honorably retired Judge Merl Code, a wise and experienced community leader who is also a Christian, spoke about his role as the Co-Chair of the REEM Commission. REEM stands for Racial Equity and Economical Mobility and was formed this past

summer to convene around matters of racial inequities, social justice and disparities in key areas in Greenville County. It was said of Judge Code that when he was asked to serve on REEM that he replied, "Only if we are truly going to do something." He talked about how we treat one another matters. He asked how we can say we believe what we believe if we don't treat one another with love- and that goes for all faiths. "Who is our neighbor?," he rhetorically asked us. The judge closed with a story about his first day in the court room here in Greenville over forty years ago. There was a man who came before him with his face badly beaten. His eyes were swollen shut, and pus was oozing down his face. Judge Code asked the arresting officer what the charge was. The officer answered that it was "resisting arrest." He asked the man with the beaten face and black skin if he was guilty of the charge. The man said, "I guess if they say I am." Judge Cole looked at the officer and said, "It seems to me looking at this man's face that his punishment far exceeds the alleged charge. If I ever see this again in my courtroom, I will make sure justice is served. Do I make myself clear?" He then said the word quickly spread, and he never again had anything like that happen in the courtroom. And then the judge looked at the camera and said, "Faith leaders in our community- the word will spread about what you will and won't accept- about what you know is right and what is wrong- about what you will and won't stand for. Stand up for injustice!" You could've heard a pin drop on the Zoom call. Maybe because we all know that a little of or a lot of Pilate resides in each of us?

In contrast to Pilate, Jesus' thought that day was not for himself at all but for others. Jesus, in his words and in his deeds, taught who our neighbor is and how we should treat one another. Jesus, God in flesh, the author of our salvation,

knowing no sin, made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant and humbled himself, becoming obedient to death- even death on a cross (Ph. 2:6-8). In his death, Jesus finishes the work of revealing God's life and love amidst brutal hatred and injustice, which was resistant to God's purposes. Let me be clear here. "This is not God's definition of justice. God's justice does not seek punishment or ensure 'peace' through violence and abuse of power. This is the lesson of the crucifixion. The cross is the ultimate paradox: divine power displayed through weakness, justice achieved through an innocent victim's willingness to suffer, so that through death, new life could illuminate a dark world. Unfortunately, even Jesus' example of willingly undergoing suffering without fighting back has been distorted to justify oppression. Many Christians have used the call to emulate Christ to argue that victims of abuse should stay silent and submit without complaining" (workingpreacher.org, Michal Beth Dinkler). This argument was also used by American slaveholders in the south, and sadly, it still continues in some Christian communities today. Again, let me be clear- **Love for God, neighbor, and self will never justify injustice.** God calls for a discipleship that loves mercy and does justice at the same time. Therefore, we're called as Christ's disciples to stand up to racism, sexism, homophobia, attacks against the vulnerable and all other injustice. We may not be a judge, but we have a voice. A voice to say that as followers of Christ "it is not okay to allow men to denigrate women, to allow white nationalism to fester, to deny someone their human rights because of their sexuality, to allow the poor to be punished for their poverty, to make health care available only to the wealthy. It is not okay according to the Good News of Jesus Christ. **What would it take for you to take a stand?**" (Jan Edminston, *A Church for Starving Artists*, blog). Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Amen.