

2026-03-15 - John 18:28-40
What is Power? What is Truth?
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Poor Pilate. I actually felt some compassion for him this week as I studied this passage. In many ways he was caught between a rock and a hard place. He had a singular job to do in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival. He needed to exert his power to try to figure out the truth about this Jesus of Nazareth. Once he did that he could take decisive steps to quell any potential riots or uprisings that might disrupt the flow of the Festival. But Pilate wasn't prepared for his conversation with Jesus; he had no idea how disarming Love can be.

There are three scenes in this morning's text. We'll look at each one.

Scene I – verses 28-32: We see Pilate and the Jewish leaders

Pilate and his compatriots in the Roman government wanted Jesus gone as badly as those in the Sanhedrin, the religious leadership. But Jesus was a Jewish rabbi – the Romans had no power to bring a legal conviction without a valid criminal charge. And the religious leaders did not have that; they had a culprit but with no clear crime. They had charges of blasphemy – Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah, the very Son of God. This, of course, was the most egregious sin within their Jewish law. But others had done that and as far as Rome was concerned it was crazy but not criminal. The punishment for blasphemy, according to Jewish religious law was death by stoning. But that was forbidden on the Sabbath and certainly forbidden during the Passover celebration. So they brought Jesus to Pontius Pilate with an attitude that said, “We're bringing this guy to you, telling you that he's a bad guy who stirs up all kinds of trouble and he needs to be gone. Trust us on this one and figure something out.”

So here was Pilate, the governor of all of Judea – which included Jerusalem but was much larger than just Jerusalem. Pilate had a palace in Jerusalem, but he only came there to visit; he didn't actually live there. He spent much more time at his home up in the north, in Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast. It's likely that Pilate had only come to Jerusalem to oversee the Passover Festival. He was in charge of the military presence, the National Guard, you might say, he was the one charged with keeping law and order through the chaos of the Festival. The population of Jerusalem swelled during Passover as did the revenue. Passover was a huge money-maker for both the religious leaders and the Romans. So while Passover had (and still has) huge religious significance, it was also (and still is) hugely important for the local economy – a bit like our Christmas celebrations. Pilate's job was to keep a short leash held in an iron fist while also allowing enough leeway and latitude that the money and celebration would flow abundantly giving the Jewish people the illusion that they were “free” to celebrate their religious holiday extravagantly – but always with Rome's tight grip maintaining control. It was a tricky balance that Pilate needed to strike. The issue of control – power – was at the center.

The Sanhedrin had their own power structure and so the temple guards had brought Jesus from the High Priest Caiaphas' residence TO Pilate's residence – but they wouldn't go in. They were already ritually clean and prepared for the Passover; if they entered the home of a Gentile they would be “unclean” and therefore unable to participate in the meal and the festivities. So here

we have a group of religious leaders who have already decided that Jesus' death was their goal. But within the parameters of their own religious law they were not allowed to do the actual killing. So they were negotiating. With Pontius Pilate. And Pilate, rather than forcing them to come inside and violate their religious law, compromised his powerful position by going out of his own home to meet these "religious leaders" on their terms. This was a very slippery slope.

Scene 2 – verses 33-38a: We move from Pilate and the religious leaders to Pilate and Jesus.

Pilate retreated back inside his home and summoned Jesus to follow him – seemingly oblivious to the fact that Jesus was also a Jew and would be rendered unclean for the Passover by entering Pilate's home. But Jesus, who didn't go in much for religious laws that had lost their meaning, followed, submitting to Pilate's power.

The issue of kingship was central to this conversation between Pilate and Jesus. As I said before, Pilate had dealt with others who'd claimed to be the Messiah and he knew "what boils in Jewish blood: the freedom to live under their own king." So his first question to Jesus revealed his underlying accusation of Jesus being a political insurrectionist. What followed, though, was a series of questions between the two that proved to be an odd dance of power.

Pilate's question, "Are you the King of the Jews?", seemed like a straightforward question that brought into focus the possibility of a real threat to the political stability of the Empire. But it was a weird question to begin with given that the only "charge" the religious leaders brought to Pilate against Jesus was that he was a trouble-maker. They had nothing more specific than that.

And as he often did, Jesus answered a question with another question. "Why are you asking this? Is this your question – or did someone else tell you to ask it?"

These questions threw Pilate for a bit a loop, they took him a little off-guard, and he was a bit defensive. His "answer" was two more questions. "I'm not a Jew, am I? What did you do?" In other words, Come on! I'm an outsider in this mess and your leaders brought you to me!

This seemed awkward! Pilate clearly knew what was expected of him but he had nothing to base a decision on – no justification for the guilty charge that was being demanded. So he was asking Jesus for a confession... or maybe he was just asking Jesus to tell his truth.

At first Jesus' reply seemed to have very little to do with Pilate's question. We know from other conversations we've heard that this is often a teaching technique for Jesus. He jumped back to the kingship question but rather than referring to himself as a king he simply began to teach Pilate about his kingdom. But Jesus' kingdom was incomprehensible to Pilate. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world, not from here." My kingdom is entirely different from this unending power struggle that the Jews and the Romans have been in for so long. Jesus said that if his kingdom were earthly, his followers would be fighting for him – the way the temple police fight to protect the religious leaders and the Roman soldiers fight for the Empire. But his followers aren't violent because that's not the sort of king he is or the sort of kingdom he comes from.

Pilate completely missed Jesus' meaning and asked, "So you are a king?"

Jesus bypassed that altogether and went on to explain to Pilate why he was born and brought into the world – to testify to the truth. "And whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice", Jesus explained. This was Jesus the Good Shepherd talking. Trying to explain to Pilate that he wasn't just *telling* him the truth but he IS Truth. He is the Shepherd King who calls each follower by name, who loves each lamb intimately and is in relationship with each one and longs for each one to be in relationship with him and with one another.

Truth is elusive in this world – for all of us! But especially, it seems, for those who occupy the halls of power.

Scene 3 – verses 38b-40: We've seen Pilate with the religious leaders and with Jesus, now we see Pilate with the people.

He left his house again and went back outside where a crowd had gathered along with the religious leaders – apparently all waiting for a verdict. But Pilate couldn't deliver, or at least he didn't deliver what they wanted. Pontius Pilate spoke the truth. He said, "I find no grounds for any charge against him." Then, he continued to negotiate with them. He tried to use their own customs for what he hoped would be a better decision. He said, "You have a custom, that I release one prisoner for you at Passover. Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?"

Pilate was clearly conflicted. Jesus had unsettled him. He couldn't understand or make sense of what Jesus had been trying to explain to him about God's kingdom – a kingdom so different than any kind of kingdom in this world – and Jesus' place as the first-born of that kingdom. But what Pilate did understand was that Jesus had not broken any Roman laws and was not a criminal, and did not deserve Roman execution by crucifixion.

Barabbas, on the other hand, was not just a common thief, but an insurrectionist and someone who had committed murder - someone who would have been happy to help overthrow the Roman oppressors. The crowd, whipped up by their religious leaders, could not see their way clear to free the Lamb of God, the Prince of Peace, the Shepherd King.

With two thousand years of hindsight we face multiple choices each day about how to follow the examples of Jesus. How will we choose to set him free, to share his upside-down vision for this world, to speak truth, to demonstrate power in ways that look like sacrificial love? O God, help us to choose the truth of non-violent, testimony-bearing, sheep-tending love. Amen.

Resources:

The Believers Church Bible Commentary, John by Willard M. Swartley

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-and-pilate-2/commentary-on-john-1828-40-4>