

Luke 22:66-23:12  
The Trial  
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We're coming to the end of our series of messages leading up to Holy Week. Next week, our lovely and talented Office Manager, Kari Otto, will share with you the decision of the crowd to release Barabbas over Jesus. Then, Palm Sunday, we're going to be led by our Sanctuary Choir as they kick off Holy Week.

In these last few weeks, we've methodically walked through the final hours of Jesus' life. And one of the questions laid before us is, what and where will we place our trust? Who is this man Jesus? Not only historically, but cosmically, eternally.

You know, we live in an era that, on the one hand, might be the most exciting and innovative in all of human history. In the last century, the rate of development in our world has left every previous era in its dust. In an article quoting former Microsoft CEO and founder Bill Gates, he says, "a full 40% of the world's population is alive today because in 1909 a German chemist named Fritz Haber invented synthetic ammonia. The rate and instance of Polio is down 99% not because the disease is going away, but because Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin invented a vaccine and the world rolled out its distribution." Communication that once took days and weeks now happens in milliseconds. Just think how something like the Revolutionary War would have happened differently if Paul Revere could have just sent a text message up to the folks at Lexington and Concord, "BTW guys, the Red Coats are coming...LOL."

Now more than ever, if you are not riding the wave of innovation, you are left behind. This brings great new advancements, but the side-effect is literally killing those who are caught up in it. As a culture, we suffer from an identity crisis. Now more than ever, the pressure many of us face is to locate our identity in what we are able to do and produce for others. The jury in front of us is the jury of our peers.

Pilate was not that different from us. He had a tough job, he worked hard at it, and he wanted to succeed. For seven years, Pilate was the Roman administrator of Judea. Certainly, Pilate had higher ambitions than being stuck in the dusty crossroads of Judea, but he would never make it to a better job back in beautiful Rome unless he succeeded here. Pilate's king was Emperor Tiberius. But as far as we know, Tiberius wasn't even aware of Pilate since he was too far down the ranks of civil servants. So Pilate had to do well here in order to get noticed.

It did not take long for Pilate to discover that Judea was a tough place to succeed. That's because the crowds were tough. There is actually a story by the Jewish Historian Josephus who says that after Pilate arrived in Judea, he made the mistake of setting up banners of the Emperor in Jerusalem. The people revolted, word got back to Rome that things were in uproar, and word soon came that Pilate needed to take down the banners.

Like any one of us, Pilate has a dream. Pilate wanted to be known; known as an innovator, a forward thinker, one worthy of moving up in the Empire. But the hardest part of his dream is that he has to please the crowd to succeed. He knows it, and so do they. He knows Jesus isn't a real threat to him or to anyone else. After all, even his lightly armed followers had all ran away. He also knew that if he didn't do something, the crowds would get out of hand.

Once again, Jesus finds himself caught between competing interests and aspirations. Theologian NT Wright says, not only was it our sin that put him on the cross, but it was also the petty competing aspirations, as well. Pilate thinks his boss is the Emperor in Rome, whom he's probably never met, and who wouldn't know him from Adam. But for all practical purposes, it's the people who Pilate *thinks* he rules who are actually ruling him.

Like anyone of us, Pilate has a dream. He has a vague idea of how he wants his life to be, and a really clear idea where he doesn't want to be. But the kicker is that Pilate needs to please the crowd to succeed. He knows it and they know it.

But in a sense, isn't the same thing true of us? We have dreams, you have dreams, I have dreams. Maybe your dream is to be on the cover of the Wabash Plain Dealer in a pancake eating contest. If it is, see me afterward and I'll tell you how it's possible. Maybe your dream is something rather more significant, but it's a dream you feel like you have to make happen by any means. Those of us who work for someone, whether it's a boss or the client, or work alongside, like a congregation, in our lives, we can feel just as much pull from the crowd as Pilate did.

It could be the people at work, or your friends, or your customers, clients, students, or patients who determine the value of your achievements. Some of us even have several crowds in our crowded life. And how horrifying it would be if we made those people king, but that is exactly what happens when we give the crowd, the culture, or the social movement the power to determine if we are fully living, if we are reaching our goals in life. Many times we don't even like the people. Anybody here ever put up with a boss or co-worker because you thought that would get you to the next level? Maybe you didn't like them anymore than Pilate liked the crowd. But because we need their approval, they continue to have control over us. That's why, at times, they are our real king.

So one night, a group of men of the Sanhedrin come before Pilate dragging a Rabbi from Galilee. It was apparent that Jesus had already been slapped around a bit. And when they bring him in front of Pilate claiming he had committed the crime of blasphemy, Pilate knew he was innocent. But Pilate was interested in Jesus for totally different reasons. You see, I think deep down, Pilate knew that there was something larger than himself unfolding before his eyes.

Jerusalem was totally off the map of Rome. It was the place Rome sent the first term congressman with a shady past, it was the place where we can send our JV officials just to get them out of our hair. So Pilate probably had a really low view of himself, and so as

a result, I think that Pilate would have gladly knelt before a king he thought was worthy. But when this broken and bruised itinerant preacher from Galilee lands in front of him, hailed by a whole crowd of Jews as King, Pilate doesn't know what to do with him. How could this man be king? And yet he couldn't dismiss him either.

So Pilate says to the crowd, "I find no guilt in him," yet he senses what the crowd wants. Then the crowd gives him his out. They say, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee to here." *Galilee! That's it. Galilee is out of my jurisdiction*, Pilate realizes that he can move the trial to Herod's court.

Deep down, Pilate knew that what he was doing was wrong, and the decision to move the trial to Herod was just to get it off his conscience. But what we learn here is that Pilate's view of success is finding the delicate balance between giving the crowd what they want while preserving at least a small part of your own soul. We say to ourselves, "Well, at least if I'm with someone—even if they're the wrong person—it beats the loneliness." Or "The money I'm making, the golden handcuffs I wear are worth being miserable in my job all the time." If we just keep giving away, little by little, the pieces of our souls, pretty soon we've got nothing left to give. And something inside you tells you it's him who I should have been serving all along. But how do I get there?

Well, I think there are a few things we can learn from this passage that will help free us from the tyranny of the crowd.

1. We have to free ourselves from wanting the carrot the crowd is dangling in front of us. Pilate wanted nothing more than to move up in the political world, but ironically, the higher he climbed, the more entrapped he became. This is the story line for the most popular TV show out there now: *House of Cards*. Congressman Frank Underwood, and I'm not quite through the first season yet so no spoilers, but Congressman Underwood is bent on climbing the political ladder. But the higher he climbs, the more integrity, the more civility, the more decency he has to sacrifice. Power for him is the most addictive and seductive drug. So the only way we can free ourselves is by giving up the carrot.

2. We look to the margins for Jesus at work. This week, many of you may have heard about the uproar that took place when World Vision, a tremendously successful and important humanitarian organization, adopted new policy with regards to their hiring policy. Initially, they adopted a policy that would allow persons of same sex relationships to be employed. The immediate decision caused an instant and inflammatory outcry in social media realm; people were either overwhelmingly supportive or utterly outraged by the decision. Subsequently, the inflammatory rhetoric and worse, the threat to withdraw support for as many as 2,000 sponsored children, caused the organization to reverse their decision.

I can't help but think that somewhere in this is a comparison, that World Vision's decision to change their policy as people threatened to withhold the support for thousands of children is a political and theological pawn against an organization and somehow akin to Pilate simply giving the people what they want. Unfortunately, the crowd allowed their

emotion and expectation to overshadow the evidence of what Jesus was doing out on the margins. They didn't bring the healed paralytic onto the stand for questioning, nor did they bring the hemorrhaging woman or Lazarus and his grave clothes. Pilate didn't look to the evidence, he didn't listen to the stories, he didn't listen to the teaching; he just gave them what they wanted.

At some point in our lives, if we want our lives to matter, really matter for the Kingdom of God, we have to stop giving the crowd what they want or expect from us and start looking to the margins, where Jesus is, to see where ministry is happening. Jesus loved the crowd, but he didn't reduce his ministry to pleasing them. We all have crowds, and the most important crowd is the one we have at home. But you know that your job is not just to please your family, it's to lead them into the Kingdom of Christ.

3. The final thing that happens, and it was something that I never noticed before I went back and read this text this week, do you see what happens in the last verse? Herod and Pilate become friends. Two enemies of one another, a shady princeling and a scheming governor are ironically brought together. Even in the midst of Jesus' trial for his life, the kingdom is beginning to break out, relationships are being reconciled, estranged lives are being brought together. What this tells me is that the Kingdom of God needs you and me, but it doesn't depend upon us.

It's up to you. Either you can continue to chase the carrot or you can choose to follow that unpredictable life transforming kingdom that is always breaking out where Jesus stands in question.

Sooner or later, a moment comes when every one of us has to face the same moment of decision. This is the moment when you have to decide for the crowd or for Jesus. Who is your king? Who is the source of your hope? Who is the one that leads your family? Who is the one that informs your choices in life? As Pilate discovered, there's no compromising your way out of this one; it is simply unavoidable. So who is king — your crowd or Jesus Christ?

When it comes to the trial, if we look closely, it's not actually Jesus who is on trial in the first place; it's Pilate, it's you, it's me. And in the end, Pilate chooses poorly and is found guilty of selling out to the crowd. Jesus, he sentenced to be crucified, but even worse, he sentenced himself to be the slave of a crowd that would never be satisfied and would never make him a success and an Emperor who, in all likelihood, would never even know the name of his governor/servant in Judea.

But the story does not have to end that way. Your story doesn't have to end this way. It all depends on the choices you make. Whom will you serve?