

Faith Mennonite Church
March 11, 2018 ~ Fourth Sunday of Lent
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Whose kingdom and whose truth?

John 18:28-40

Last week Ry preached about the importance of location—social, political, economic, religious—in which biblical stories and present-day stories take place. In the first part of John 18, Jesus was arrested in a garden outside of the city and then taken to the court of the high priest in Jerusalem for an initial round of questions. It was not just Jesus who was questioned, but also Peter, who followed Jesus after his arrest, and stood by a fire in the outdoor courtyard, wanting to stay close to Jesus...but not too close. We know Peter's story, of how he buckled under the pressure of the moment and the questions. All of us know Peter's story, for at some time, in some place, we too, have hidden our faith, have felt embarrassed to be associated with Jesus, or at least with some who claim to be his followers.

Just before the point where our reading began today, Jesus was shuttled between Annas and Caiaphas, the former being the father-in-law of the latter, who was the high priest. They send him on to the headquarters of Pilate, the Roman provincial governor. Roman rule was not neatly divided into executive, legislative and judicial areas. Pilate represented all three. He was regional ruler, legislator, and judge, responsible only to the Caesar. Pilate did not reside in Jerusalem; he lived in a sprawling garrison by the sea at Caesarea Maritima. He likely came to Jerusalem to "keep the peace" during Passover. This was, of course, the festival when the Jewish people remembered and celebrated their release from another empirical power, when they were slaves in Egypt. The population of Jerusalem swelled at this holiday as pilgrims came from throughout Palestine. We surmise that Pilate's headquarters in Jerusalem were close to the temple, where he could keep an eye on the center of Jewish life. Location, location, location.

This makes possible the back and forth of the interrogation scenes that we read, when Pilate moves between Jesus on the inside of his headquarters and the Jewish leaders on the outside, close to their headquarters. As the story unfolds, we note a fair dose of irony in the author's account.

First, the temple guards deliver Jesus to Pilate, but they will not enter his domain so that they remain ritually pure and able to celebrate the upcoming Passover. They fear the defilement of a location—Gentile space—yet seem to overlook the spiritual defilement of handing over one of their Jewish brothers to the Romans. They want to celebrate Passover as usual. Yet, throughout this gospel, the writer John portrays Jesus as the true Passover lamb who will be glorified as he is raised up on the cross.

Pilate's first question is to the religious leaders. He goes out and asks them what their charge is. They don't respond with a specific charge. Instead they make a circular argument: we wouldn't have handed him over if he weren't a criminal. Pilate challenges them to deal with Jesus in their own religious court, but they object: "We are not permitted to put anyone to death." Huh? We know from other gospels that Jewish men felt it proper to stone those who were guilty of certain actions. And after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (back in chapter 11), the Pharisees began to plan a way to kill him. Perhaps their true meaning here was, "we are not permitted to put anyone to death on a cross." That was a Roman practice. Knowing that Jesus had a great deal of support among the populace, they likely would have faced strong opposition if they had taken his life. But if Rome were to crucify him: his followers would be duly warned and the religious leaders could remain pure.

Next, Pilate returns to Jesus, who stands in the defiled location. We often read his question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" as if he were genuinely curious. But the record left by the Jewish historian Josephus suggest otherwise. Pilate was ruthless and derided his Jewish subjects. The Gospel of Luke refers to a time when Pilate mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1). The historical record shows that Pilate was eventually recalled by Rome after a massacre in Samaria. He had gone too far. In this moment, we can expect that Pilate, not vacillating between two sides in an argument he must adjudicate, but simply playing the two sides off, as a cat playing with a mouse. Richard's reading this morning, "YOU are the king of the Jews?" is probably the correct nuance here.

However, as much as Pilate wants to be in control of the interrogation, Jesus deftly puts *him* on trial. Rebuffing Pilate's taunt he calmly asks: "Do you think this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate recoils: "I am not a Jew, am I?" Since the Jewish leaders did not give a clear reason for why they handed Jesus over to him, he asks Jesus what he is guilty of. Jesus announces his innocence in a round-about way. He returns to the first question of kingship and announces that his kingdom is not from this world, evidenced by the fact that his followers didn't fight to protect him. Pilate likely cannot comprehend the notion of a king who wouldn't have a protective guard, so he avoids that matter and simply pounces: So you *are* a king!"

Again, Jesus doesn't answer straight on, but says that his calling, his authority is to "testify to the truth." In an echo of the "Good Shepherd" passage in John 10, where Jesus says that the sheep hear the voice of the good shepherd and follow, Jesus now tells Pilate: "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate's responds with a rhetorical question, "What is truth?" Just like the response "fake news" he shuts down further dialog. He is not interested in the truth or in listening to Jesus.

Pilate doesn't give Jesus a chance to reply, but returns to the Jewish leaders. He derides them, "I find no case against him," but offers them an out: "We have this agreement, during your Passover celebration, that we release one prisoner. Shall I release your 'king'?" No, they say, give us Barabbas.

The truth gets trampled. Pilate has said Jesus, standing in the defiled place, is not guilty, but he doesn't act accordingly. He doesn't release him as a judge with integrity would. Instead he acquiesces to the demand of the Jewish leaders that a true insurrectionist be released. The Jewish leaders, in their undefiled place, were offended by the authority that Jesus had claimed, and incensed by the truth of his teaching that had drawn a considerable following. They must have thought they were the winners that day. But there are no winners when truth is traded for unchecked power and eventual violence.

The tragedy of this story is not in what is about to happen to Jesus, but rather what has already happened to the Jewish religious institution as it has turned to the Gentile state, the occupying, brutal force, to have the final say in an internal, family dispute. These leaders gave into fear...fear of new interpretations, fear that the truth might upset the status quo, that uneasy alliance they had worked out with the Roman occupiers. Fear blinded them to the presence of grace, "grace upon grace," of love, of truth that Jesus offered to all who would listen.

We don't use the language of "kingdom" much these days, after more than two centuries of living in a country that was birthed in the rejection of monarchy and the adoption of democratic rule. Yet the temptation of power and the tendency to sacrifice the truth in the service of that power have never disappeared. In fact, they are glaringly manifest today. As we consider how to live faithfully in this day, this time, this location, we can do no better than to daily renew our allegiance to Jesus, one who guides us as a shepherd, inviting us to hear and follow his voice, ...one who stoops to wash the feet of his followers who he calls to be friends, not servants, ...one whose nonviolent way always leads to truth and life.

The path of Jesus might lead to the cross, but he assures us that he will bear it with us.