

“Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Sermon: The Pilate in all of us”

Apostles Creed Series

Text: Matthew 27:11-26 Jesus before Pilate

I love to read biographies. Since I majored in American Political history, I prefer biographies of leading figures in 19th and 20th century American history. Being a preacher, I am particularly drawn to political figures who are great orators and to those who use Biblical language in their speeches. It is not surprising that my clear favorites are Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. I used to make it a habit to read a biography on Abraham Lincoln every year. A few years ago I read David Herbert Donald's masterpiece on Lincoln and I felt there wasn't anything new to be said; however, I started reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln," and I loved every page.

Several biographers of Lincoln and King have noted their similarities with Jesus and his suffering. All three figures were men of great character trying to confront and eradicate horrible evils. All engendered violent opposition that eventually resulted in their murders.

Biographies tell us about the person but also about the times in which they lived.

A few weeks ago Anthony Lewis wrote a review for the New York Times of Taylor Branch's final installment on Martin Luther King Jr. "Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68." Lewis wrote: "*We have nothing like it in this country in living memory: a commanding moral voice, attached to no political party or public office, that moved governments and changed social institutions. He was despised by many. He failed as well as succeeded. But he would not retreat from attacking what he came to believe were the three great afflictions of humankind: racism, war and poverty. In little more than a dozen years—from Dec 5, 1955 when he set the Montgomery bus boycott on its way, to April 4, 1968 when he was murdered—he changed the face of America.*"

It is interesting to see how the world still handles individuals with a commanding moral authority. Often, we see as in the case of Gandhi and King in this century, that when you don't like the message or feel it threatens your place in the social order, "**you kill the messenger.**" Hoping this will stop the message.

King never co-opted. When Stokely Carmichael and black power activists pressed violent responses to the violent and bloody acts of Racist opponents, King reiterated his convictions.

"I am not going to allow anybody to pull me so low as to use the very methods that perpetuated evil throughout our civilization.

I am sick and tired of violence,

I am sick and tired of the war in Vietnam,

I am tired of war and conflict in the world.

I am tired of shooting. I'm tired of hatred.

I'm tired of selfishness. I'm tired of evil.

I am not going to use violence no matter who says it."

Effective history writing requires for at least fifty years' time to pass. We are continuing to uncover the

depravity of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and his part in feeding the fires that killed King. Why didn't President Lyndon Johnson fire Hoover? Why was it that the President was unwilling to fire the FBI's arrogant and ruthless dictator? The standard answer is that they too feared the poison he would unleash against anyone who stood up to him.

My own theory was that Hoover embodied the toxic beliefs and prejudices of his era. It is hard to fire someone for expressing the prejudices that were shared by millions.

This is a long and convoluted introduction to this section in the Apostles' Creed. This section of the Creed **highlights** important events in Jesus' life.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

It is an **odd thing** that the only human name which appears in the Apostles' Creed is the name of the Roman governor who was guilty of agreeing to carry out the most notorious public execution in history.

Who was Pilate? He was the Roman appointed governor of Judea from AD 26-36. He must have been a competent military commander and an efficient administrator or he wouldn't have been selected to control this notoriously difficult region.

Pilate operated under an administrative style used by most Roman governors in foreign provinces. As long as order was maintained and taxes paid, the governors would let the local authorities have some autonomy.

But the **final arbiter** of all disputes remained in the hands of the Roman governor.

In Jesus' case—his fate was determined by Pilate . . .

The Bible gives us more about the **mind and heart of Pilate** than about anyone else outside Jesus' inner circle. It is ironic—while Jesus' obvious pain on the cross was **outward** and **public**, we are given insights to Pilate's conflicts that are **inward** and **private**.

The Bible was written before the modern period where we tend to psychoanalyze every decision. The Bible usually just described what happened—not attempting to interpret what was going on in the inner working of participants' minds. I remember comments made by Professor David Adams after I preached what I thought was a very insightful sermon on a gospel story.

“Brassard, get Freud out of your sermons!

The gospels don't psychologize; you'd best not start!”

So here are the facts the Bible reports about Pilate:

- He was never in any doubt of the innocence of Jesus.
- He was aware that Jesus offered no viable political threat.
- He was aware that a malicious motivated group had trumped up charges against Jesus in order to remove his growing influence.

Matthew tells us that His wife dreamed that Jesus was innocent.

And yet, in the end Pilate gave his verdict against Jesus and ordered his crucifixion.

Various Bibles suggest the reason:

PILATE DID WRONG BECAUSE HE WAS AFRAID TO DO RIGHT.

JESUS WAS SACRIFICED IN ORDER FOR PILATE TO KEEP HIS POSITION AND FURTHER HIS AMBITION.

Why are we given these insights into the inner conflicts of Pontius Pilate? Why is Pilate mentioned in the Creed? The reason is that the Bible and the Creed are making a theological affirmation. You and I -- as members of sinful humanity—share much in common with Pilate. We do so by our deceit, our self-interest, our looking out for number one, make decisions that kill the message of Jesus Christ.

Pilate is portrayed as one who did what was expedient. He then did something symbolically to escape responsibility—he **washed his hands of it**.

We read this story in a time when **everything is political**. Today, politics is more important than policy.

Telling the truth and doing what is right is routinely sacrificed on the altar of **preserving power**.

We should have some sympathy for Pilate:

- Pilate was pushed from all sides.
- He was a player, probably a believer, in the brutal and racist Roman social system, and it would have been nearly impossible to think he agreed with the radical things Jesus was saying. Pilate would always support the status quo!

He was also pushed by the Jewish political leadership: the Sanhedrin. They had a lot of power . . . they were volatile if they didn't get their way. Trade offs were common: You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

Maybe Pilate had what they call a **KATRINA MOMENT**. You know what that is?

It's when the conflict between reason and your emotions becomes too much, causing one's emotions to ricochet rapidly between spectacular highs and dreadful lows.

Ever been asked to mediate between two warring groups of people? Maybe family members?

Conflicted couples? They are so passionate: they are right and the other party is wrong . And no— they “can't all just get along.”

Pilate was **clever...he thought he could make it a win/win**.

He thought he had an out that would appease everyone. If the crowd wanted blood—he would give them Barabbas . . . In those days when capital punishment was frequent and public, Barabbas was notorious, convicted of several capital crimes.

. But even that backfired . . .

Question: **Who was the biggest winner in silencing Jesus?**

Did that play into Pilate's decision-making calculus?

Institutionalized practices are nearly impossible to change.

Social injustices that are accepted practices don't change easily, if ever.

Not much changed between Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and Dr. Martin Luther King's March on Washington 100 years later . . . the forces of segregation just got more **lethal** . . . they shot freedom riders and courageous Blacks who attempted to sign up to vote . . . and everyone knew who did it . . . but they never got arrested.

“OK—crucify him! There---now leave me alone! They don't pay me enough to do anything more!”

The gospels, unlike “The Passion of the Christ,” tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion with astonishing restraint. Why? Because people were well aware of crucifixion . . . it was **far too common**.
After the siege of Tyre, Alexander the Great crucified 2000 Tyrians
During the Jewish civil wars—800 men were crucified at one time
In Sicily, the Emperor Augustus once crucified 600 men.

It seems that we have accepted as commonplace the tragic violence in our urban areas. While I was in seminary the wife of a classmate of mine taught High School in the Bronx. She took the train from Princeton each day to the City. Her brother became ill and after a long struggle died of cancer. He was in his late twenties. She went to his funeral and was away from school for nearly a week. After she returned to work I asked her, “How were the kids?” .
“They were nice, several were really sweet. One girl asked me where I had been and I told her my brother died.” she said.

“I’m sorry. Do you know who shot him?” the high school youth asked.
“Here I am thinking I am unique to lose a brother in his twenties. For these youth it is quite common.”

Something that is consistently overlooked in most preaching is that Jesus was **an historic figure**.
As you read his biography found in the gospels **you get insight** into the times an which he lived.

Jesus was challenging the **accepted practices of his era**. Yes, Jesus confronted institutionalized sin. The racism of his day was the demonization of Samaritans. Jesus' best-known parable is the one about the “**Good Samaritan**.” Jesus was lifting up a hated minority population that was routinely denigrated. Jesus challenged the injustices perpetrated against women and widows. He railed against the practice that blamed the sick, the disabled, and he lame for their conditions. He had a lot to say about greed . . .
Jesus reserved some of his harshest criticism for those that **publicly paraded their piety**, while their actions **proclaimed** their **poisonous prejudices**.

Jesus is juxtaposed with **Pilate** to show us, “**the real cost of moral leadership**”.
Pilate was not willing to pay the price and so innocent people continued to suffer. Violence continued to take its toll. Legally supported policies persisted, while individuals seeking change got muzzled.

Paul Waldman who blogs for Media Matters a watchdog group writes, “There is a real reluctance to get tough with people in power. We are a society that does not value the truth. Selfishness justifies everything.”

Pilate's dilemma illustrates the power of sin in our world. How frequently it stops people from doing what is right.
Expediency. Popularity. Self interest. Greed. Fear. Self-preservation. Political power.

Yet God has a way of wringing good out of evil.

No **oppressive religious or political establishment** can withstand **the freedom** Jesus was calling for. His followers gave themselves over to a discipline life of fasting and prayer—often celibacy as well.

They were willing to die rather than renounce their Lord and his gospel of redemption.

Jesus is the one king whose kingdom runs in opposition to every nation and state,
every demonic principality and power,
every ethnic group and voting bloc,
every worldly authority that claims final authority.

It matters not whether the demand for absolute allegiance occurs under the tyranny of a Roman emperor, a Theocratic Dictator, or a popularly elected President.

Ralph Wood, seminary professor, took his family to Europe and visited Dachau, the concentration camp located near Munich. With good cause the Germans have not made it an easy place to find. Having located the train for Dachau they discovered it was loaded with American college students enjoying a European spring vacation. They too were traveling to Dachau.

It was the weekend of the NCAA basketball championship, and the train was wild with talk about the tournament. Wood who was pretty somber was kind of embarrassed with the levity of the his fellow Americans---traveling to a Nazi death camp as if going to a sporting event.

Yet something surprisingly strange happened when the America students entered the camp gates adorned with the mocking slogan WORK MAKES FREE. Silence fell over the group. Everything became eerily quiet. As the group walked through the dormitories and past the crematoria, no one clucked confidently about the terrible thing that the **Germans had done** to the Jews.

Woods said the whole group sensed, in a subterranean and unconfessed way, **that we also** ---could commit such unspeakable crimes.

I had no desire to say THEY DID THIS . . . but rather, WE DID THIS.

In slaying him, Pontius Pilate, along with the Pharisees and the Sadducees who persuaded him that Christ must be killed—serves as our representative.

The killing of Jesus reveals the horrible heart of sin.

Sin, said Luther, is not lying and cheating; it is not slander and adultery; it is not even murder. These dreadful sins, **plural**, are the **ugly manifestation** of **sin singular**.

It is the rejection of God's mercy and grace.

When we recite that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, we are saying we believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.