

As we continue reading the final week of Jesus leading to Easter, we're going to learn about three people on the way to the cross. Each of these people displayed something common in all of us, something that desperately needs to change in the human condition. In the end, I want you to see how Jesus responded. His response pointed toward a story at work behind the scenes.

Religious Leaders

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans on how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." 7 So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me." Matthew 27:1-10

The first person on the way to the cross is embodied by the religious leaders. They had an incongruent spirituality. They plotted to kill (v.1), yet were concerned about financial purity. They lost integrity, wholeness, between who they claimed to be, and how they acted. Their spirituality seemed off. Imagine someone who boasts of their religious morality, but can't maintain a healthy relationship Or someone who can talk the Christian talk, but hates people. The first person you meet on the way to the cross are the religious leaders and their incongruent spirituality.

Pilate

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "You have said so," Jesus replied. When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor. Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name

was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him. While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" vv. 11-23

The second person you meet on the way to the cross is Pilate. An archeological discovery in 1962 names Pilate as prefect of Judea. We also know from several historians about Pilate's character. Philo described Pilate as "a man of very inflexible disposition...of most ferocious passions." The Jewish historian, Josephus, details two incidents between Pilate and the Jewish community that highlight Pilate's aggression.

First, Rome placed in Jerusalem Roman standards, which were large poles affixed with circular plaques. The plaques typically displayed the image of Caesar, but, out of respect for the Jewish law against graven images, Pilate's predecessor left the plaques blank. When Pilate became prefect, he put the image of Caesar on the plaques during the night. The next day, the Jewish people were furious, and a large gathering came to protest at Pilate's residence. Pilate ordered his soldiers to surround the Jewish gathering inconspicuously, and at Pilate's signal, the soldiers burst forth in full armor. The Jewish people bared neck, willing to die rather than disobey the law. Pilate relented.

Second, Pilate intended to build an aqueduct. To pay for the aqueduct, Pilate took money from the Temple Tax, which was considered a holy tax. Again, a large gathering protested Pilate's action in Jerusalem. This time, Pilate ordered his soldiers to dress in civilian clothes and carry clubs. At his signal, the soldiers clubbed some of the Jewish mob and dispersed the protest.

This background is relevant because it shows that Pilate had a complicated history with the Jewish people. I think it is that history which, at least in part, drove his actions in this scene with Jesus. Pilate's past clouded his judgment with Jesus. We can see this in contrast between what Pilate knew and what Pilate did.

Pilate was impressed by Jesus (v.11-17), and he knew the intentions of leaders (v.18) in bringing Jesus to him. In fact, there was perhaps some

collaboration in Jerusalem between Caiaphas and Pilate. One of the first acts, when Pilate's successor took office a few years later, was to dispose of Caiaphas as High Priest.

Pilate was impressed by Jesus and knew the reason why this event was taking place. Yet, he acted in contrary ways. He ignored his wife's warning (v.19), and he offloaded his responsibility (v.20-26). His actions were driven by fear - he rejected what he saw and knew to keep the peace. His past actions clouded his judgment.

Soldiers

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. vv. 27-31

The third person you meet on the way to the cross is represented by the soldiers. The soldiers are interesting because they were outsiders who perpetuated tragedy. They were outsiders from another region of the empire, disconnected from the religious context of the scene. Yet, they entered the scene and caused harm. They are the people at work who interrupt the meeting, create chaos among the team and then leave you to pick up the pieces. Or perhaps you have family who say the one thing, in the one way that wrecks you. The soldiers were outsiders who created harm.

Them and Us

These three types of people you meet along the way are part of the Jesus story. Religious leaders who lacked integrity. Pilate who was stuck in his past. Soldiers who perpetuated the tragedy. If you read this story without any pre-knowledge, two observations stand out. First, something is deeply wrong with humanity. Each of us can probably think of people in our lives (past or present) who embody these three types of people in the Jesus story. In fact, perhaps you've had a picture of someone in mind the entire time I've been talking. Maybe you feel like your dislike for that person feels justified. It's easier to read these scenes and be against "them" - those three are the problem.

But you can't go down that road because of the second observation. There's another layer. This is not a story in which you stand back and critique. This is not a story about other people. This is a story that we participate in. As you read the Jesus story, you realize that you and I are part of the three. I live incongruently - claim spirituality that I don't

fulfill. I lead out of fear from my past - and find it easier to offload responsibility. I perpetuate tragedy - cause hurt to others and walk away, and so do you. The three people we meet on the way to the cross - are us.

Familiarity of Judas

This is why Judas is such a compelling character. Our first reaction to Judas is, "I would never be like Judas." But Judas is a lot closer to us than we would like to admit. Judas gave back coins. He regretted what he set in motion. He attempted to undo the pain. But notice this is not about freeing Jesus. "I have sinned," said Judas. He realized that something was deeply wrong in him. Returning the coins was not about setting Jesus free, but freeing himself from the chaos in his internal world. A Bible commentator observed, "The strange thing about sin is that a man can come to hate the very thing he gained by it" (William Barclay). Judas acted in ways in which we are all deeply familiar.

What is Jesus' response?

In this deep awareness of our place on the way to the cross, we are left to face the final figure in these scenes: Jesus. What was Jesus' response to the three people on the way to the cross? Two things. One, Jesus responded with silence in the face of accusations. Jesus' silence, as Mark taught last week, was an act of embracing the will of His Father. Jesus chose to believe the God-narrative going on, which looked different than what was happening. Two, Jesus responded by enduring suffering. The writer of Hebrews described Jesus as enduring suffering because of the joy set before Him. Jesus saw joy and embraced the God-narrative. Not all things in life should be endured. But, if God was doing something good through the pain, it was worth enduring.

Jesus endured suffering from people on the way to the cross so that He could bring a change to those exact people. He died on the cross for the religious leaders whose spirituality was disingenuous. He died for Pilate; whose past clouded his judgment. He died for the soldiers, who were outsiders and caused suffering. The people who sent Jesus to the cross were the same people for whom Jesus died on the cross.

And He died for you. He died for you, even though you align yourself with a way of humanity that is destructive and heading towards destruction. Pastor and author Eugene H. Peterson put it this way, "The work of salvation takes place in the ruins of broken commitments and the rubble of deteriorated loyalties." It is in the middle of your story - even as you line the road to the cross - that Jesus offers salvation.

Yes, you are one of the three people on the way to the cross. But the grace of God turns to you and offers you a new way. Instead of lining the way to the cross, you now follow Jesus on the way of the cross. It is a gift for you to live a new kind of life with Jesus.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2019 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA
Catalog No. 1434-37Sz