

*Face-to Face With Jesus: The Persistent Stain of Injustice*

*Matthew 27: 11-26*

*March 16, 2008*

I hope you felt a certain sensation just a moment ago as we read the gospel text in “round-robin” fashion. Did you? As we read the text we moved closer and closer to you. We didn’t do this to “weird you out,” but instead to give you the sensation that I think Pilate felt in his face-to-face encounter on this Palm/Passion Sunday. I am completing a sermon series for Lent entitled “Face-to-Face with Jesus.” Each Sunday during Lent we have looked at eyeball-to-eyeball encounters with Jesus from different characters in the gospels. Now for the most part these have been very positive, even liberating, encounters for these figures. We have seen the liberation of healing the blind man, the empathy of Jesus when face-to-face with Lazarus and his sisters, the life changing encounters felt by Nicodemus and the woman at the well in the gospel of John. But today’s encounter between Pilate and Jesus is very different. The sensation I feel on behalf of Pilate is not liberation, but instead a kind of closing in of his political world. In the end we sense that Pilate is completely hemmed in by the religious authorities. Although he knows the right thing to do, the just thing to do, he is somehow powerless to do the right thing and sends Jesus to the Cross. In Matthew’s version he literally washes his hands of the matter to escape responsibility. But we know better. The blood stays on his hands. Injustice leaves a persistent stain that even the acceptance of the religious leaders cannot fully take away from him. As we look at his enigmatic character I’d like to

suggest that Pilate had lost all wiggle room in his difficult role as judge, jury and executioner to do the right thing.

Who was Pilate? There is much legend about his character and there are several biased opinions by Roman historians and the Jewish historians, Philo and Josephus. But we can gauge a few facts about his effectiveness as the governor of this section of Palestine. But ultimately we have to look at him as a dramatic character in an intricate play. As Shakespeare's Hamlet said, "The play's the thing in which I'll catch the conscience of the King." Philo speaks badly of Pilate and reports of an incident in which he hung gaudy votive shields in the Jerusalem palace with the emperor's name and was ordered to remove them by the emperor. This caused much furor among the residents of Jerusalem. Josephus reports three civil incidents involving Pilate. The first was a protest to Pilate parading idols with the image of Caesar on them that offended the Jewish residents. Roman leaders for many years had known to take down these idolatrous idols that so infuriated the Jews of the area. But Pilate arrogantly refused to recognize their religious devotion. On another occasion Pilate recognized that they needed to upgrade the Jerusalem water supply by constructing a new aqueduct. But he tried to use Temple treasury money to finance the new project over the objections of the Temple leadership. In response Pilate's men bludgeoned a few rowdies over the incident. But finally it is reported that he was removed from his position after ten years over an incident in Samaria over a religious insurrection in which a few of its leaders were cruelly and unjustly executed. Apparently a Samaritan charlatan claimed a special find of Moses' relics at their temple post at Mt. Gerazim. The religious pilgrims, though never violent,

showed up armed at the religious rally. And Pilate had them all slaughtered. This was the last straw and finally the Roman regional manager had Pilate removed and returned to Rome. So somewhere during this sequence of unjust actions we have our scene today with Jesus. Pilate knows the charges against Jesus of treason and inciting a revolution are bogus. But the religious leaders egg on the crowd. And when we read that Pilate saw that they were on the verge of riot, he crumpled like a cheap suit. He was between a dog and a fire hydrant. He was caught up in those two corporate maxims: ego and cover your tail. He had long since lost all high moral ground and had no other choice than to hand over this powerless, suffering servant to the executioner.

I think of two recent tragic fallen figures on the local and national scene: Chuck Rosenthal and Gov. Eliot Spitzer. What caused the cheers on the Wall Street trading floor at Spitzer's fall? What caused political allies to run for the hills for cover at the revelation of the first eyebrow-raising email by Rosenthal? In each case I think you can find that the measuring stick of justice for those they pursued so self-righteously was much tougher than the ones they applied to themselves. In other words, there was little or no wiggle room for political recovery. For those who show mercy shall obtain mercy. Only those who remove the log from their own eye will see clearly enough to remove the speck from their opponent's eye.

Ultimately, of course, we need to turn this question back on ourselves. As we approach General Conference with high expectations that justice will be done for LGBT people, we must ask the tough question of ourselves, "Have we removed the

log from our own eye?” Do we as a church have the room to negotiate with integrity our own demands for social justice for people of differing sexual orientations and gender identities? If we hold the banner for welcoming and accepting all people, do we speak from the high ground of moral integrity? Are we walking the talk?

I have to tell you that when I meet a group or individual to introduce them to Bering, I always begin by telling the story of social action and justice by Bering people on behalf of the other. Such was the case this past Thursday when we entertained over Thursday night dinner students from the Perkins School of Theology. Dr. Gary Brewton had asked me to tell them the story of Bering Omega Community Services and Open Gate Community Youth Services. I love to do this, because we have such a good story to tell. I get around to our reconciling mission to be sure. But it is only when they understand that our foundation is what we do in the community first, and then for ourselves. And we have such a good story to tell: feeding the homeless in the kitchens of SEARCH, taking risks for the Kingdom in seeking out street youth, providing free healthcare services for those who have no other sources to go to. With that foundation in place I can then tell the story for the relentless search for full inclusion. I say, “one day we’ll look on the injustice facing LGBT people and say, “What were we thinking?” As I looked at the women who are the majority in the Seminary class last Thursday, I said, “As we look back at the time when women were blocked from the ordained ministry, we almost have to laugh to ourselves, what were we thinking?” As I looked at the African-American women and men (who represent almost half of that class), I said, “As we remember the experience of American slavery, we have to ask ourselves what were we thinking?”

I wonder if Pilate was nearby Golgotha that Good Friday. If he was or if he was safely in his palace, I wonder if he thought to himself, still trying to rid himself of the stain of injustice that would not wash away: "What was I thinking?" I was thinking the other day, in preparing for this Palm/Passion Sunday of our tradition of waving palms just how domesticated our version of Palm Sunday has become from that first gathering. The first gathering was anything but domesticated. It was intensely political. As Jesus rode in as the Prince of Peace, the King of the Jews, he and the crowds were saying to the authorities that God's kingdom is not like yours. They were saying that Jesus is going to turn this world inside out and upside-down. Does our celebration reflect that? Not really. I have a vision that next year our procession down Harold Street will include banners proclaiming what we about in the areas of social justice. One of our banners should proclaim full inclusion; perhaps another will protest what we think of unjust wars; another will proclaim the value we place on protecting this fragile planet and its environment. Let's make that a goal for us this time next year on Palm/Passion Sunday. Let's put the passion back in the palms. So what if we were on trial for fighting the evil social systems of our world today? Would we have enough wiggle room to speak with authority and to make a difference? Would there be enough evidence to convict us of removing the deep stain of social injustice. Can we say, just like Isaiah: "Who will bring a case against me? Let us appear in court together! Who will bring a case against me? Let that person approach me. Look, the Lord is coming to my help! Who dares condemn me?"