

Title: What shall I do with Jesus?
Text: Matthew 27.11-26
Theme: We are like Pilate.
Series: Matthew #121
Prop Stmtnt: Only you can answer that question.

Read Text:

Everyone needs to hear the truth, but most people would rather not hear the truth. If you are the type of person who is desperate for people to like you, then you may appear to be a wonderful person, but you will be a train wreck as a leader. You will always be trapped between your desire for people to like you and being true. In the end, the very thing that you desire (people liking you) will betray you because they will find out that you were not truthful. All of that is in this text. It is a fascinating but heavy text full of irony, intensity, hatred, anguish and politics (and not the good kind). The heart of it is a contrast between Christ and Pilate and here is where we see how Matthew's theme in his gospel account brilliantly displayed. All through this gospel, Matthew writes with the theme of "Behold your King!" Every story, every statement, every description shows that Jesus is not only the King, but he is a King unlike any king or ruler in history. His leadership is so radically different than the short-term, people-pleasing, political game-playing that we are accustomed to. As we look at this text, we are going to see a bad example of leadership in Pilate. And while you can certainly learn from and be warned by Pilate's example, my burden in preaching this text is not that you will primarily learn good leadership from Jesus, but that you will love Jesus, trust Jesus, be amazed at Jesus, worship Jesus, and follow Jesus. It is only when you love him, trust him, are amazed by him, worship him and follow him, that you will lead like him.

The betrayal of Christ and his initial trial was marked by people who hate him. In the second phase of his trial we are introduced to a man named Pilate. Pilate is the representative of the Roman government and empire. Pilate lived in Caesarea. (the area of Caesar) Caesarea was on the Mediterranean and was actually a lovely place. If you were going to be sent by Rome to this hotbed of trouble, you might as well find the best place to live. But, during festivals and times when it was most likely that problems and riots would erupt, Pilate would come to Jerusalem. He would stay only as long as he had to in order to keep a lid on things. Pilate is needed by the Jewish authorities because they want to kill Jesus, but they lack the authority to do it. In order to execute someone, they had to get permission from Rome, unless a Gentile went into the Jewish section of the Temple. In that case, Rome gave the Jews permission to kill the transgressor on the spot.

So, Pilate is needed by the Jews who hate Christ so deeply that they want him dead. But, in this account he is the representative of people who sort of respect Jesus, who are intrigued by Jesus, who are even intimidated by Jesus, but in the end are unwilling to stand up for Jesus. And because he is unwilling to lead, and is unwilling to do what he knows is the right thing, he consents to the execution of Christ, even while he claims that he is innocent. You cannot consent to the execution of Christ and be innocent. The point is blatantly obvious. You cannot be ambivalent about Jesus. You either love him or you

hate him. There is no middle ground. Pilate's dilemma is summarized in his question: "What shall I do with Jesus?" Just like Pilate, you have to answer the question of, "*what shall I do with Jesus?*" No one can answer that question for you. But, if you answer that question correctly it will cost you. And you have to weigh that cost. If you answer that question incorrectly it will also cost you. And you need to weight that cost too. But, like Pilate, many try to avoid answering the question.

1. **You can try to pass the buck.** (v.11)

Pilate tried to bail out on the matter by sending Jesus off to Herod. We find that out from Luke's account. But Herod only sent him back to Pilate. John includes an interesting tidbit (18.28). When Christ was taken to Pilate, the chief priests would not enter the building because if they did, they would be ceremonially unclean and could not eat the Passover meal that evening. So, they remain outside, while Jesus is taken inside. Matthew does not record the entire conversation but only focuses upon one part. But, the scene has two aspects to it. Inside Pilate talks with Jesus in private and then outside Pilate talks with the chief priests, the leaders and the crowd in public.

In the text, Christ says very little, while Pilate is doing most of the talking. Most of the talking that Pilate does is in the form of questions. He asks 6 questions in these verses and most of them are nothing more than attempts at avoiding responsibility for making a decision. Pilate is desperate. You almost feel sorry for him. He is looking for a way out of having to actually make a decision. He tries to hide behind procedure, precedent, and even appeasement. In the end he tries to hide behind symbolism. But, the ugly truth is that Pilate is a coward who refuses to make the right call. He is willing to sacrifice what is true in order to save his own neck. That is called politics and he is playing politics. He calculates the situation based on what is expedient and not based on what is right. He is in a bind. You always are when you play politics. He needs the support of the Sanhedrin otherwise they can make life disastrous. On other hand, they are never satisfied and will push and push and push. If they find a weak spot in his armor, they will attack. So Pilate wants to keep them happy and yet he does not want to be seen as weak and capitulating to their demands. So, what is he supposed to do? Keeping all of that in mind, I find the response of Christ in v.11 to be fascinating. Pilate has obviously been given a list of charges that the Jews have against Jesus. He does not care about any of them as they relate to blasphemy or religious stuff, but he does care about a possible insurrection, and is interested in the claim of Christ to be king. So, he asks him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus says, "You have said so." Jesus responded this way to Judas (26.25) to the chief priest (26.64) and now to Pilate. It was a response that was designed to place the responsibility of the issue back on the one who asked it. That is exactly what Matthew is pointing out. Pilate is trying to avoid responsibility and Jesus won't let him. What will he do with Jesus? No one can make that decision for him.

Jesus is a radically different king. He does not make decisions based upon overnight poll numbers and increased twitter followers. His leadership is marked by an unrelenting commitment to the long game. He does not pass the buck and try to get out of the tough problems. He is here, standing in our place.

2. You can try to change the focus. (vv.15-22)

Pilate's relationship with the people in Jerusalem was very sketchy. When he was first appointed governor, he decided to establish his authority with a bold show of force and sent his army to carry standards (banners) that bore the resemblance of Caesar into the city of Jerusalem. Previous governors restrained from doing this because it was considered to be offensive to the people and they might revolt. Pilate did it anyway. The citizens of Jerusalem were so angry that a large group of them went to Caesarea to where Pilate lived in order to protest. Pilate refused to meet with them. There would be no negotiations. They wouldn't leave. He sent an emissary telling them that the policy would not change. They wouldn't leave. For five days they protested until he finally agreed to meet with them in the local amphitheater. But that was merely a ploy to get them all in one place where he threatened to behead every one of them if they did not stop and go home. Now Pilate was not prepared to kill them, but he wanted to scare them into submission. The people were not scared. In fact some of them knelt before the soldiers and laid bare their necks daring the soldiers to chop off their heads! Pilate gave in and had the standards removed. The Jewish leaders knew how to push his buttons in order to get what they wanted and Pilate hated them even more. Pilate was hot-tempered man whose first actions incited a revolt that almost resulted in a massacre. Rome was not pleased. This and a number of other explosive situations resulted in this hateful relationship that Pilate had with the leaders and the people. So now, when they bring Jesus to him demanding that he kill Christ, Pilate does not want to give in to their demands lest he look weak, but neither does he want another riot.

Look at the scene. In v.11, Pilate is talking with Christ in private in his quarters, but in v.12 he goes out to speak with the chief priests and those who brought him to Pilate. There, Pilate hears more of their accusations which Matthew does not record but the other gospel accounts do, and so Pilate steps back inside and asks Christ about all of the things that these people are saying. This time Christ does not answer. Matthew says that at the end of v.14, that Pilate was greatly amazed. Obviously, Pilate's amazement is related directly to the fact that Christ does not defend himself, argue or plead his own innocence. The truth is, Christ is bearing our sins and in that sense, he is not innocent. But while he is credited with our sins, Christ has not committed any sin. He is perfectly pure. He is righteous and he is truth. Can you imagine having a private audience with Christ? Here is a man who knows everything about you and with Pilate, there is a lot to know. Christ knows the people he has murdered, the women he has raped, the people he has insulted and disregarded and the lies he has told. Pilate is cruel, evil and corrupt. And here is a prisoner who does not have to say a word or do anything other than just stand there, and Pilate is shaken to the core. Compounding the personal dilemma for Pilate is the fact that Pilate's wife has sent him a message telling him not to have anything to do with this righteous man because she had a dream about him and it shook her to the core. Pilate wants out of this. Inside his quarters his decision is obvious. Christ should be let go. Outside it is a different matter.

By this time a crowd has gathered. So, Pilate plays to them. He tries to bypass the chief priests and appeal directly to the crowd. If he can somehow change the focus and get the crowd to overrule the chief priests then he can play their game against them. It was customary for Pilate to release a prisoner at Passover. This was probably an attempt at Pilate to earn some good will with the people. So, he asks them whom they want him to release Barabbas or Jesus. Barabbas was an insurrectionist. He was a notorious murderer that to Pilate made the choice very easy. Of course the people would choose Christ. They could see through the motives of the chief priests. Pilate's ploy was like pure genius. Here was his way out. He would pretend that he was leaving it up to the people to make the decision. That way he could tell the chief priests that it was their people who made the decision, not him. He was simply being a good governor, showing favor to his subjects. But here is another amazing irony. Bar-abbas literally means, son of father. And it is also believed by many that his actual name was Jesus Barabbas, though he was referred to primarily in the historical records as just Barabbas in order to not be confused with Christ. So in essence Pilate is saying, do you want me to release to you Jesus, the son of father (Abbas), or Jesus who claims to be the Son of the Father. The one, Barabbas promises to deliver by the sword and the other provides deliverance by his death.

At this point something very important happens. The chief priests turn the crowds against Jesus. Throughout the gospels, the crowds have always supported Christ, but now even they turn against him. It is popular to say that on Palm Sunday they cried Hosanna and on this Friday they called for his death. It is true, but there may be more to it. The crowds outside of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday would have most likely been comprised of people from outside of the city of Jerusalem who had gathered there for the Passover celebration. This crowd would have been made up of many from Galilee and would have had many opportunities to see and hear Christ. They would naturally be more favorable to Christ. The crowd gathered here was probably comprised primarily of the citizens of Jerusalem. So, it may not be completely accurate to say that the same people who cheered him on Sunday now jeered him on Friday. At any rate, the crowds are persuaded by the chief priests to "ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus." That verb "destroy" is an intense verb. The hatred and vile is thick. Pilate's little scheme appears to have failed but he doesn't give up. He now is arguing with the crowd. If he releases Barabbas to them, who is a real criminal, then what is supposed to do with Jesus? The very fact that Pilate asks the question in that manner reveals that he knows full well that Jesus is completely innocent and he now tries to throw it back on the people again. But now they cry, "Let him be crucified." Crucified? Let him be crucified? Are you kidding me? Do you know what you are asking? Do you know what happens in a crucifixion? Do you know what you are asking of me? This man is innocent. Pilate knows it and now he asks the 6th question. He cries out in exasperation. Why? What evil has he done? They do not answer the question because there is no answer. They only shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified."

Look at this scene. What do Pilate, the chief priests and the people all have in common? Everyone is in it for themselves. The chief priests know this about Pilate and they exploit this. Pilate knows this about them and tries to exploit it as well. Both Pilate and the chief priests know this about the people and both try to use them as leverage against the other. Standing in the middle of all of this is Jesus. He is the only one, not in it for himself.

This is our King. This is our King standing in the middle of the kingdoms of this world. The leaders do not care about the people; they only care about their power. The people do not care about truth and what is right; they only care about going along with the rest of the crowd. This is a picture of our world. This is a picture of us. The kingdoms of this world are characterized by people who are in it for themselves. In our own country, politicians get into power and stay in power by promising people they can have everything they want right now and that someone else will pay for it. Sadly, we hear the same thing in churches, don't we? You can have the life of your dreams. God will give it to you. The prosperity theology poison twists the gospel into a message that promises to give you what you want now. It is very popular because it pleases the crowds. Pleasing the crowds does not mean that it is right. If you are going to stand with Jesus, you can often expect to stand alone. So, what will Pilate do? What will he do with Jesus?

3. **You can try to appease the crowd.** (v.26)

Each of the gospel accounts give us a different view of the life of Christ. John points out that Pilate has Jesus scourged and then after that, he tries one last time to let Christ go free. When you put the pieces together it appears that Pilate is trying to satisfy their demands by having Christ scourged. By doing that, and then by bringing him out to show them would calm them down and while Jesus would have been severely beaten, at least Pilate would not have condemned him to death.

People who were scourged were generally tied to a pillar or bent over a large rock or piece of furniture so that their back was completely exposed. Then one or two men using a whip that had pieces of bone, and metal tied to the leather straps would beat the man until they were done. The result would be that large pieces of flesh would be ripped from his body leaving bone and even certain organs exposed. When the movie, the Passion of Christ was released, people were offended at this scene. In truth, scourging was worse than what the movie depicted. The beating was so severe, that many of the victims would die from it, which in the end would be merciful since it meant that they would not have to be crucified. In other cases, like that of Christ, it would mean that his death on the cross would come sooner rather than later since the scourging would be so violent. How could you watch someone be scourged and not be moved with pity? How could you call for a man's blood and not have your anger assuaged when you saw him ripped into a bloody mess? Pilate had him scourged. And then he presents Christ to them. They are not satisfied. They demand crucifixion.

4. **You can try to blame others.** (vv.24-25)

Pilate is exasperated. He cannot find a way out. He cannot appease these people without crucifying Christ and he cannot crucify Christ without betraying the truth. So, what does he do? He tries to claim innocence. You have heard the expression, "I am washing my hands of the entire situation." That expression comes from this event. Pilate is claiming to be innocent. "I am innocent of this man's blood." But, he is the one (v.26) who releases

Barabbas. He is the one who has Jesus scourged. He is the one who delivers Jesus to be crucified. He is not innocent and water will not wash away that guilt.

This is the excuse that goes all the way back to Genesis 3, isn't it? "It isn't my fault, it was the woman that you gave me who caused me to sin." Aaron repeats it in Exodus 32 when he says, "It was the people's fault. They made me do it. I just threw the gold in the fire and out came this calf." But did you notice what Pilate said? "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Does that sound familiar? That is exactly what the chief priests said to Judas (27.4) isn't it? "We're not responsible for this!" as their blood money is bouncing around their feet. "I am innocent of this man's blood!" as the stone pavement is stained with the blood of Christ from the beating that he received by Pilate's orders. And in this moment of frenzy, a cry, a chant arises from the crowd that is one of the most chilling and gripping things you will ever read.

The people yelled, "His blood be upon us and upon our children!" This one phrase could be an entire sermon. There are two dangers to avoid. One, we should not try to make this less than what it is and two, we should not make this more than what it is. This cry by the people is a cry that implicates the entire nation in the death of Christ. He came to his own and his own received him not. The prophet Zechariah said that one day the Jews will look upon Jesus, whom they pierced and will mourn for him as one would mourn for an only son. Israel is responsible for the death of Christ. In this moment, they owned it. The consequences of this is seen a short while later when the nation is wiped out by the Romans, when Jerusalem is destroyed by Titus and when the last remnant of Jews hiding out in Masada are driven to suicide instead of surrender. They asked for the judgment of God, there is no getting around it. Jesus said so when he cursed the fig tree. But, this does not in anyway justify any anti-Semitism, the crusades, the Holocaust or anything like it. In fact, the apostle Paul who had every reason to be hateful toward the Jews continually prioritized them with his attempts to reach them with the gospel and even prayed for his own life to be separated from God if that would bring them to salvation in Christ. So, this cry is grievous, but the truth is, the Jews are not solely responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, Pilate is too. The Romans are too. The guilt is national and international. Just as Israel was to be the nation that represented the world as the people of God, Israel was the nation that represented the world in rejecting God. When Adam sinned, we sinned. When Israel and Rome rejected Christ and crucified Christ, so did we. His blood is on all of us and it is on all of us equally. So, what will you do with Jesus?

5. **You have to answer the question.**

A. What will it cost you to answer it incorrectly?

It will cost you your soul. It will cost you your conscience. It will cost you the truth. It will cost you eternity. It will cost you heaven. It will cost you peace. It will cost you forgiveness. It will cost you joy. It will cost you love. It will cost you contentment. It will cost you satisfaction. It will cost you wholeness. It will cost you everything that matters for eternity.

B. What will it cost you to answer it right?

It may cost you friends, now. It may cost you respect, now. It may cost you a job, now. It may cost you a career, now. It may cost you persecution, now. It may cost you rejection, now. It may cost you misunderstanding. It may cost you some loneliness and betrayal, now. But those are not the only things that you may lose. You will lose condemnation. You will lose guilt. You will lose fear. You will lose shame. You will lose death. You will lose hell. You will lose despair. You will lose abandonment. You will lose being lost.

And in perhaps the greatest irony of all, the blood of Christ is on us all yet only the blood of Christ will wash away that guilt. Christ came to this world in order to live a perfect life and to die on the cross as the full and final payment for our sin. You hear me say that over and over, but do not get numb to this truth. His death was excruciating (the English word we get from crucifixion) because our sin is that toxic. We will often say when counseling people that if your problem with sin is a “10” then you are not going to get this matter resolved if you only give an effort that is a “3”. The reason why you would only work at about a 3 level on a 10 level issue is because you don’t see this as serious as God does. When we look at Christ being hated, being rejected, being scourged and eventually crucified, as hard as it is for us to look at this and to keep looking, and to feel the weight of this, we need to. We need to not only see that our sin is serious, but we need to see that his grace is greater. His death at the hands of the Jews and Romans was the means by which he offered up himself as the sinless and infinite sacrifice in our place that paid in full the debt of our sin, even while his life provided infinite righteousness. When you acknowledge your sin and accept your guilt and confess that to God and believe in Christ as your only Savior, then your sin and guilt is counted as having been paid by Christ and you are counted as being righteous through Christ. When you come to faith in Christ, then you are brought into union with Christ and all of the benefits of Christ are yours. You are absorbed into him. He is bigger than you. You get lost in him. But only as you are lost in him are you truly found. Union with Christ means that who he is more important than who you are. He is righteous and you are a sinner. Who he is is more important. Who he is, wins. He is righteous and you are a sinner. His righteousness wins, every single time. Union with Christ means that what he has done is more important than what you have done. You have done some really bad things. Your sin, your deception, your rebellion, your guilt is bad. It is really bad. But, what he has done is more important than what you have done. He has lived a perfect life in your place. He bore your sin on his body. He paid for your sin with every stripe that he received. He satisfied the wrath of God against your sin when he died in your place. What he did is die in your place. What you did is sin. What he did is more important and more valuable than what you did. His death wipes out your sin. His death wins!

So, what is your answer? What will you do with Jesus?