

Riverside United Church
March 30, 2025

Scripture Lesson: Luke 22: 66 -23: 12

Jesus before the Council

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. They said, 'If you are the Messiah, tell us.' He replied, 'If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.' All of them asked, 'Are you, then, the Son of God?' He said to them, 'You say that I am.' Then they said, 'What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!'

Jesus before Pilate

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

Jesus before Herod

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“The Last Hours: #4 - The Showdown of Truth”

Rev. Paul Dillman

As we continue to read the narrative in Luke of Jesus' last hours, one of the most intriguing characters in this story is Pilate. Pilate is the Roman governor assigned to the Jerusalem area during Jesus' ministry and so it would seem that he somewhat reluctantly finds himself in the midst of this dispute between the Jewish authorities and Jesus. Hard to know if he had a course or briefing in Judaism 101 or not.

In the gospel of Luke, we don't hear some of the best known features of Pilate's encounter with Jesus. We don't hear about him washing his hands of responsibility for the insistence on punishing Jesus. We don't hear him ask the profound question "What is truth?" as he has the discussion with Jesus.

But, there is an undertone of his frustration and not being convinced of the guilt of Jesus. There is a sense of the "what is truth" question lingering in the air as the conversation with Jesus feels like they are talking at different levels.

One of the unique things about Luke's account of this last hours stories is the interaction of Pilate and Herod. Herod had Roman governance responsibility for the area that included Galilee, so Pilate was able to argue that Jesus was under his jurisdiction. And then we hear that Pilate and Herod became friends. It is interesting how bonds are formed when there is a common problem or enemy.

I think if I was Pilate or Herod, I would have found Jesus quite annoying because he never answered their questions with a straightforward answer. He was speaking at a different level and it was about more than not wanting to incriminate himself. Jesus was talking about a different source of power, a different vision of kingdom, a deeper sense of truth.

I gave this sermon the title, The Showdown of Truth, and if one doesn't know the story, then maybe the expectation would be a debate, or an argument, or an intense discussion. Maybe it was one of those and 30 plus years of oral tradition had forgotten the intensity. But, what was remembered was the different levels of the conversation.

Are you the king of Jews?

You say so.

This has been the conversation before the Jewish council and then Herod - questions are asked and answers are not given. Jesus faced his accusers but didn't fall into the traps that they set that would have proven their prejudgements and limited understanding.

I wonder what would have happened if Jesus and Pilate could have had a good conversation about the important question - What is truth? - if they could have had it under less pressure filled circumstances.

What is truth? It is one of the universal human questions. It is a philosophical question. It is a theological question. It is a scientific question.

One of the problems we have in our culture now is that it has become a factual question. With all the misinformation and disinformation and with lying becoming normal, we are in deep trouble when we can't even find common ground on the facts of our lives and world.

We don't have many forums left for showdowns of truth. Hopefully, courtrooms may be one place. Truth seems rare in political debate. We have to pay attention to the sources of our news because spin is so common we are no longer dizzy. Many voices of religious traditions seek to indoctrinate rather than invite dialogue.

Maybe showdown isn't the best word because that sets up truth to be confrontational rather than conversational.

Do you think Jesus and Pilate might have had a good conversation if the stakes and expectations weren't so high? It is hard to have a good conversation if there is an angry crowd screaming in the background. It is hard to have a good conversation if the goal is to convince someone else that you are right.

Ralph Milton, who is retired writer and book publisher within the United Church of Canada, has a wonderful book entitled, Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God? The subtitle is *Discovering Yourself in Biblical Stories*. One of the wonderful stories that he includes is a story written from the perspective of Pilate's wife, Claudia. The story is entitled, "They might have seen themselves as brothers."

I wonder, sometimes, if they might have been friends. If they had met in some other circumstance, I think my husband and Jesus might have liked each other. They were about the same age. Both of them passionate, committed, opinionated. Bullheaded sometimes. And intelligent too, I think. Except they thought so differently. Jesus was a Jew. Pilate was a Roman. And Pilate never understood the Jews, and that drove him almost to distraction. "You can't get a clear answer out of them about anything," he would fume. "Ask them a straight, logical question and they tell you a story, for gawd sake!"

The story goes on to explain how they got this assignment and the challenges that it brought. The story continues:

And then the Jesus business broke. It was a recipe for disaster. Pilate couldn't win this one and I knew it. I even had dreams about it. "Get this man Jesus out of your life, Pilate," I said. "No matter what you do, you'll lose."

They brought the prisoner up to the praetorium. Pilate met them outside, a gesture of good will, so the Judean leaders wouldn't need to contaminate themselves, or whatever terrible thing is supposed to happen when they set foot inside a Roman building. He interviewed Jesus there in front of them.

"Look," he finally said. "The guy is just a little crazy, and yes, a bit of a trouble-maker. But he hasn't done anything to deserve execution. I mean, I can't have him killed just because you people don't like him. What I'll do is have him flogged. That'll straighten him out."

Well, you should have heard the hullabaloo. 'We want him dead!' they yelled. 'We want him crucified!' Listen. Pilate has integrity. He's shown that before and he showed it then. He wasn't about to execute a man unless a crime had been committed, and blasphemy was no crime in Roman eyes. But Pilate was no fool either. He knew that Caiaphas had his ways of getting messages to Rome.

What followed was a mish-mash of political maneuvering, charges, and counter charges. I don't quite know what happened. I was in bed for most of it fighting off a migraine.

But I'll not soon forget what happened when Pilate dragged this Jesus up into our quarters so he could talk with him, away from all the yelling and screaming outside. That was when it struck me how alike they were, and yet how different. Two men of talent and integrity speaking to each across such vastly different realities.

In spite of all the pressure, Pilate still wanted to do the right thing. "Look," he said to Jesus. "Give me a reason, give me something that'll satisfy that mob — something I can put in my report to Rome so I don't have to have you killed." Jesus looked right back at Pilate — looked at —through him. But he said nothing.

Pilate lost his cool. "Look, I have the power of life and death over you. I can send you out to be torn apart by that mob, or I can save your hide."

"You have no real power over me," said Jesus. "No power that really counts. You and I are caught in this evil drama. You have your role to play, and I have mine."

"All right," said Pilate. "What's your role, except to satisfy the bloodlust of that mob?"

"I am called to live the truth," said Jesus.

"What is truth?" Pilate asked quietly, almost cynically. Jesus looked at him intently. And yes, compassionately. But he said nothing.

"Look, I asked you a question. What is truth?" Pilate lost his cool again. He paced around the room and banged his fist against the wall. But both men knew, I think, that Jesus could not reply in any way that Pilate could comprehend. Nor would Jesus have understood had Pilate defined truth for him.

She concludes the story:

And yet I wonder. If Pilate and this Jesus had met some other way, perhaps they would have learned to like each other — if they had had a chance to really talk, without the pressure. Pilate, the logical philosopher, might have discovered the poetic dreamer deep inside himself. And Jesus, the poetic dreamer, might have shown to Pilate the philosophy on which his dream was built.

There would have been respect at least. And just perhaps they might have seen themselves as brothers.

This story out of Ralph Milton's imagination invites us to imagine how perspectives of truth might have conversation. How do the logical philosophers and the poetic dreamers be in conversation and seek common ground. How do we perspectives of science and theology talk to one another? How do disciplines of economics and social work interact? When might political leaders seek deeper truth than revealed in polls of popular opinion.

What is truth is an eternal question and as we seek to live the way of Jesus we are invited to live the truth of love, of hope, of compassion, of integrity - as we seek deeper meaning and purpose than is the common message in our society. There are times when we are confounded by the choices and priorities we see lived out, and yet we are invited to continue to listen for the voice, the truth, the love that Jesus lived. Amen.

