

The Way of Empire and the Way of Jesus

John 18:28-40

Introduction:

As we journey through the Lent Season we have been following along with the Leader Magazine Worship resources as they focus on the events of Holy Week, Jesus' last week before his crucifixion, and in particular, on the areas of dissonance we see in these passages. Dissonance being defined as "a tension or clash resulting from the combination of two disharmonious...elements." So we're focusing attention on those things in the passages that seem to butt up against each other.

And in that light we've talked about knowing and not knowing; about the journey of faith that Peter was on, and that we are on. A journey that is not linear but is full of twists and turns, moments of enlightenment and moments of confusion and doubt, and that it all belongs, is all part of this journey.

Last week Luke preached from John 18, the story of Jesus' arrest and trial before the High Priest. Our attention was brought to how Peter, and how we, can act out of self-protection, despite our best intentions. And how Jesus didn't prioritize self-protection in his trial, remaining committed to non-violence, even non-resistance to what was taking place.

John 18:28-40

As we continue, today we're focusing our attention on John 18:28-40 where we see Jesus, already arrested, already questioned by the High Priest, now brought before the Roman Governor, Pilate, the one who can decide his earthly fate.

As an aside, I want to note something that the Writing Team of Leader brings to our attention about the language we see in the Gospel of John around the Jewish leaders and people. They note:

"Given the sometimes-disastrous history of interpretation and the existence of anti-Semitism and hate crimes in our time, it is important to consider the context in which the gospel of John was written. The writers of John's gospel frequently and often disparagingly reference "the Jews." Recall though, that in the earliest days of Christianity, most Christians were Jewish, just as Jesus and his disciples were Jewish. They simply held different ideas than some of their contemporaries about the identity of the Messiah. At the

time of John's gospel, the Johannine community was experiencing a schism. The harshness of the gospel's negative references to "the Jews" likely reflects the pain of this fracturing in their community. But the conflict was an intra-religious one, like we might experience within the Mennonite world when we grapple with differences in belief and practice held by different Mennonite congregations or denominations. The authors of John's gospel were not making an interreligious claim about the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. Please be intentional about how you present the gospel's characterization of "the Jews." In the spirit of nonviolence and peacemaking, may we work to repair the culture of anti-Semitism and Christian supremacy that has sometimes been fueled by the very texts we will spend time with during this Lenten season." (p. 36).

I appreciate that this team notes this because it is important that we are careful in the language we use and it is important that we keep in mind the context of the time when we look at these passages. Today's passage can appear to have undertones of this discrimination so I wanted to note this before we unpack this passage more.

So as we return to the passage, we see a group of religious leaders are wanting Jesus gone. They are tired of the disruption he and his movement are bringing, the challenges to the status quo. So having questioned Jesus themselves already, they now bring him to Pilate, the Roman Governor. Pilate asks them what the charges are and they answer: **"If he had done nothing wrong, we wouldn't have handed him over to you."** Kind of a curious answer, as if saying 'just trust us that he's guilty.'

Pilate seems unconvinced. The way Pilate is presented it seems that he doesn't want to be bothered with this so tells the leaders to deal with Jesus themselves. Now, this portrayal may partly be the result of the context of the time that we referred to and the anti-Semitic undertones. It may also be due to the reality that the Roman Empire was likely more concerned with political and military threats and Pilate deems Jesus to not be a threat in this way.

Either way, the leaders who brought Jesus forward demand Pilate's attention in this passage. It isn't enough for Jesus to be tried by them. He needs a public execution by crucifixion, something the Governor must sign off on. So Pilate reengages and questions Jesus more on his own, asking him plainly, **"Are you the king of the Jews?"** and **"What have you done?"**

Jesus has opportunity here to plead his case, but he doesn't. He responds with a question of his own, **“Do you say this on your own [Pilate] or have others spoken to you about me?”** and then with more abstract responses as opposed to a defense. He says, **“My kingdom doesn't originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn't have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn't from here.”** And then, **“You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.”**

Hardly a good defense when his life hangs in the balance. Still, Pilate, in this passage, doesn't seem to think Jesus is a threat so tells the prosecution he doesn't see any grounds for charges against Jesus. And then Pilate presents an offer to the prosecution: **‘I'll release one prisoner to you. Do you want Jesus?’** and they reply, **“No, give us Barabbas”** who was another prisoner the prosecution preferred released.

Now, I want to note here that the different gospels all describe slightly different details of this story, focusing on slightly different angles. So how much and what Jesus says and how much and what Pilate says and the extent of his involvement is slightly different depending on which version we read. But in each version, we see Jesus not really mounting a defense, Pilate not really wanting to take responsibility but ultimately giving the crowd what they want, which is the crucifixion of Jesus.

Ways of Empire and ways of Jesus:

So that's the story we have and what I want to draw our attention to this morning is the dissonance, the difference, the tension, the clash between the ways of empire (both religious empire and political empire) and the ways of Jesus.

This is something that Anabaptists have long emphasized: that there is a real difference between the ways of empire and the ways of Jesus, a different worldview, different values, different actions. I want to draw our attention to several.

First, we see the value placed on power and control over and against humility, love, and service. The religious and political leaders exerted tremendous control over people and wielded a lot of power. They had prestige and influence. And throughout Jesus' ministry we see him continually butting heads with them. Jesus, his life, his teachings, his movement, challenged the existing power structures by emphasizing love for all, the primacy of humility, and the value of serving one

another (especially leaders taking the posture of a servant). While empire seems concerned with maintaining power and status and wealth, Jesus didn't. He was concerned about people, that they experienced love, peace, hope, salvation and acceptance from God. Vastly different priorities and values.

Second, we see the priority of eliminating dissent and difference in empire as opposed to embracing diversity, welcoming difference. Religious and political empires want to snuff out dissent and difference because, again, it's a threat to the current power structure. Here, the religious leaders wanted rid of Jesus as he was challenging the structures and customs in place. And the political empire was especially concerned with threats to their power which was a reason for crucifixion, a brutal and public death as a means of discouraging any dissent. Looking beyond this passage and into human history we see this same sentiment of wanting to eliminate difference behind some of our worst periods and actions and wars in both religious and political spheres. We're seeing it happen currently in many places.

On the other hand, Jesus showed love, acceptance, hospitality, and welcome to diverse people and those that were deemed 'less-than' in society like fishermen, tax collectors, women, children, those deemed as 'sinners', those with leprosy, shepherds, foreigners, and the like. It didn't matter if you were on the outside looking in within the existing power structures in society, you could find belonging and acceptance with Jesus. Even those who failed time and again, I'm thinking of Peter here, were welcomed in time and again. It seems this love and acceptance of Jesus was part of what so angered those in power and led to this point in the story.

Third, we see the use of violent means to a so-called peaceful end as opposed to peace as the means and the end. As with the other things I've mentioned, we continue seeing these same values today. There has long been and continues to be this belief that the means don't have to match the ends. That the way to create peace is through violently eliminating or subduing any opposition. Within the Roman Empire around the time of this passage, peace was achieved through violently conquering others and then subduing opponents so they couldn't dissent. Violence as the means to so-called 'peace'. And again we are seeing history repeat itself in our world right now. In stark opposition to this we see Jesus valuing nonviolence, even when faced with his own death. For Jesus, it seems that the means had to match the ends. That if peace was a goal, if peace was truly part of the fruit of God's Spirit, part of God's very nature, then the way to peace was

peace. It reminds me of words attributed to Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, **“There is no way to peace, peace is the way.”**

So we have the ways of empire (both then and now) that include:

- Prioritizing holding onto power and control over others
- Discouraging and stamping out dissent and difference, anything viewed as a threat to the existing power structures.
- The use of violent means to achieve so-called peaceful ends. And I want to make note here that it isn't just physical violence that we see within empire but also the use of violence emotionally, verbally, psychologically, spiritually, etc. Anything used to harm and control the other so as to keep them down so your status isn't threatened.

And in contrast we have the ways of Jesus that include:

- Prioritizing the person.
- Offering love, compassion, grace.
- Welcoming and accepting the outsiders and 'sinners'
- Valuing honesty and integrity
- Encouraging servant leadership and humility
- Valuing peace, both as the means and the end.

When you think of the ways of empire and the ways of Jesus, do any other differences come to mind?

There are stark differences between the ways of empire and the ways of Jesus. And as a result there was and will be dissonance, tension, discomfort anytime someone attempts to walk in the ways of Jesus publicly amidst cultures and societies that lean toward the ways of empire.

But not only this, there can also be a felt tension within us when we want to live by our convictions of peace and nonviolence but also experience extreme anger and frustration at the injustices that are present within empire.

I think here of Peter again and the passage Luke preached on last week. Peter had walked with Jesus for a few years before Jesus' arrest. He would have been aware of Jesus' values and convictions. Yet when a soldier comes to arrest Jesus, Peter takes his sword and strikes the soldier before Jesus rebukes his actions. Like Peter, I, and I think many others who deeply value peace, may often feel like lashing out when we observe what is happening in our world.

But then we look again at Jesus and his commitment to peace and nonviolence. He has no intention of stopping the injustice of what is happening in our passage today. He is committed to seeing this through. I feel a dissonance within myself observing Jesus' refusal to mount a defense. And I wonder what it would have been like for his followers and others to watch that? How different that posture was from what they had seen? With the benefit of hindsight we can be grateful for Jesus' posture, the depth of love, the commitment to offering humanity something different, to offer salvation, to offer peace.

As we go from here, continuing in the season of Lent, I want to intentionally not wrap up with sermon with a neat bow, not resolve the tension and dissonance we may feel, but rather leave us to sit in the tension and leave us to wrestle with some questions this week. So I leave us with this:

Where are we living complicit with the ways of empire in our lives individually and communally? Where are we choosing to hold onto power and control? Where are we choosing to not leave room for difference, for questions? Where are we choosing violence whether that be physical, emotional, psychological, verbal, or spiritual?

Where do we feel discomfort and dissonance in observing Jesus' actions in today's passage? What makes us uncomfortable as we read this?

And lastly, what opportunities do we see from this for ourselves here and now, in a world so often at odds with the way of Jesus, the way of peace?

As we sit with these questions, as we sit in the dissonance, may we know God's faithful presence with us even in the tension that this Lenten season can bring.