

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Year A

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March 26, 2017

Text: Mark 15 (selected)

Title: “24 Hours That Changed the World: Jesus, Barabbas & Pilate”

A former parishioner of mine, Dr. Nolen Hudson, gave me a cassette tape, a lecture by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. Dr. Remen is a leading voice in the emerging mind/body health field and has been known to the general public largely through her New York Times Bestseller, Kitchen Table Wisdom – a book worthy of shelf space in anyone’s home. The taped lecture was powerful and filled with life-giving stories.

One story stood out. It was told by an Italian psychiatrist who invited people to imagine that they were interviewing three men who cut stones for the construction of a great cathedral during the Middle Ages. Their job day in and day out was to cut the stones into square blocks – a foot by foot by nine inches.

Imagine you are standing there as they work. You watch them for a while. Someone brings a stone to each cutter. They cut it into a block a foot by foot by nine inches. Another stone is brought to each. They too are cut. More stones brought. You move up to the first cutter and ask: “What are you doing, sir?”

“What does it look like I’m doing, you idiot?! They bring me a stone. I cut it into a block. They bring me a stone. I cut it into a block. I’ve been doing it since I’ve been old enough to hold a hammer and chisel, and I’ll be doing it to the day I die! Use your eyes!”

You move away from the bitter man to the next cutter: “What are you doing, sir?” The man turns with a warm smile on his face and says: “I am earning a living for my beloved family. With the money I earn we have built a house to contain our love. There is good food on the table. I’m providing a home, a safe and loving place for my family.”

To the third cutter: “What are you doing, sir?” The cutter turns with a radiant smile, beaming at you. “I am building here a holy white house where people who have lost their way -- people who feel they are alone in the world -- can come and be healed and it’ll stand for a thousand years.”

“All three are doing exactly the same thing,” said Dr. Remen. Yet, their work held vastly different meaning for each. “Investing a routine task with precious personal meaning opens the routine to the experience of joy,” she said.

I thought about that story as I read Mark’s account of Jesus being tried before Pilate because what we believe makes all the difference in how we experience life. The embittered

priests, scribes and elders saw in Jesus someone who threatened their authority. He wouldn't abide by their restrictions of eating and drinking with the right people. He expressed mercy for sinners. He had power they could only dream of having when freeing people from illnesses--mental and physical. He told the poor that they were special to God: blessed. He preached that the first are last and the last first in God's kingdom, that if you want to be great in God's kingdom then it meant serving others rather than lording it over them. Earlier in Mark's Gospel there was a conflict among the disciples when James and John asked Jesus to sit on his right and his left when he came into his glory. The other disciples were understandably angry about these two inserting themselves—or at least attempting to do so—in a way that would place them above all the others. Jesus tells them :

... whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45)

So here he stands, accused by the religious community out of which he came, bloodied by those who supposedly loved the Lord their God with all their hearts, all their minds and all their souls as their Mezuzah's on all the door posts of their homes reminded them to do. A Mezuzah is a small rectangular box that contains the great Shema or Great Commandment found in Deuteronomy 6:9:

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup>You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

The Mezuzah was attached to the door post of every home and was a visible reminder to live one's life according to the great Shema. Jesus, of course, added to the great commandment when he lifted up a teaching out of Leviticus 19 as being the second most important commandment:

<sup>17</sup>You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. <sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Out of the heart of the Torah came these two commandments. They all knew them, and so did the crowd if it can be assumed that most were Jews. Their doorposts reminded them, and yet somehow these are forgotten as they have dragged Jesus to Pilate after claiming he has done something deserving of death.

Jesus stands in stark contrast to all of them. He is the embodiment of someone who keeps the great Shema and the second greatest commandment. He reveals a willingness to die to reveal his love for God and for neighbor. He is willing to show that no greater love is there than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Jesus stands alone in this. Everyone else in this drama is separated from him. Everyone.

Pilate, of course, is the consummate politician. He was known to be cruel and harsh in the way in which he governed. He was no fool, and it wasn't difficult to see that those who brought Jesus to him did so because Jesus disrupted their own power and authority and now they wanted to use Pilate to dispense with this thorn-in-their-side-Jesus, because Pilate alone had the power to have Jesus killed.

Cruel though he may have been, Pilate resists being their patsy. Though they've dragged Jesus to him like a dog, it's clear to him that Jesus is no threat to him, that he is no revolutionary. He didn't have the anger in his eyes, the deep resentment Pilate and other Romans had seen over and over again as they've occupied countries and found themselves in prolonged battles with those who deeply resented being oppressed by a foreign government. It's very much in keeping with the Palestinian/Israeli conflict that continues to express itself in violence one against the other. Or in our own context the manifest destiny which is "...the 19th-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the US throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable." (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>). That belief resulted in direct conflict with Native Americans—or First Nations as our northern neighbor calls them—who were here first and understandably resented and resisted occupation.

Those dragging Jesus before Pilate were there before the Romans invaded, and there were those who so hated the occupation that they were willing to fight to the death to overthrow the invaders. Pilate had to be cautious here because if Jesus belonged to this crowd of would be overthrowers, then he was dangerous and a threat to him. He'd heard of Jesus apparently. Anyone who drew great crowds of people and had followers probably attracted a governor's attention. He was aware of the concept of the Jewish Messiah who supposedly was a figure who would come and restore King David's kingdom to its former glory. He knew there were those out there that had this vision of the future. He had to be careful with Jesus.

So Pilate asks him straight out if he is the king of the Jews and Jesus, split lip bleeding a bit, offers a strange response: "You say so." Or "If you say so." Jesus would not argue, would not make his own case, did not even pretend that he was being falsely accused as the chief priests hurled their accusations about him at Pilate. So angry and resentful were they. So resigned was Jesus. There was no angry fire in him. If he was a revolutionary bent on restoring David's kingdom to its former greatness, Pilate couldn't see it in him. And so when the chief priests are finished with their rant--like an angry rapper finishes his song, Pilate prods Jesus again, "Don't you have anything to say to these accusations?" Jesus remains silent. Refuses to fight back. Jesus stands alone in stark contrast and separated from every other human being as he embodies the presence of God in this world.

Pilate is forced to make a choice but before he does so, he makes a move designed to wiggle out of making that choice. He takes Jesus before the crowd. Pilate wants to avoid being used by the religious community to kill a man who does not have the disposition to run a military campaign against so great a power as Rome. And so he decides to allow the crowd to make a choice. He tells them they can choose to release a prisoner. Barabbas who has the anger, fire and resentment required to use violence to restore David's kingdom or Jesus who does not. Jesus refuses to use violence to make them or us conscious of God, but Barabbas? Well, he is quite happy to use violence as a tool against the Roman occupiers.

But Jesus is not interested in making David's kingdom great again. He refuses that mantle. Jesus instead reveals that God's kingdom is already great and that God is already ruling. It's just that observers cannot see because it is hidden in what they think is the weakness of the

world. It is hidden in this suffering Son of Man who appears to be under the complete control of his enemies like a dog dragged about by its leash: the priests, the scribes, the elders, Pilate and the crowd. Jesus is completely alone in this as God is alone in ruling. Making God's kingdom great is found in the suffering One in front of them and none of them can see that. Losing your life in order to gain it. That's the power of God's kingdom, the greatness of God's kingdom, but no one can see it. And I expect we still have trouble seeing it.

As they all yell "Crucify him!" they cannot see that the One who allows it, is great beyond measure though he will not use violence to prove it. The One who undergoes flogging looks so weak and helpless and beaten and yet he reveals in that weakness the power of God's kingdom which is already great. Doesn't need Pilate's help or the priests or elders or scribes or even the crowd's affirmation to prove it. God's kingdom is already great and will outlast the cruel purveyors of the kind of greatness that dies by its own violence. Jesus will not participate in the nationalistic hopes of those who want him to lead through the use of violent rebellion. They have the likes of Barabbas for that. But Jesus will never embrace that kind of power as the true measure of greatness. Jesus already knows that God's power supersedes any weaponry, any insurrection, any force that chooses threats and violence to control people. Jesus knows more than anyone else in this drama that God's greatness lies in the power of love, that the great Shema is the guiding principle for entrance into God's kingdom and that greatness will not die on the cross. They may put it on trial and even try to crucify it but they will never be successful in killing it. God rules through love, with love and in love.

The chief priest, scribes, elders, Pilate and the crowd have a choice. Choose the way of Barabbas or the way of Jesus who stands in sharp contrast to every other human being in this drama. It's a choice between a higher purpose—embracing the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus—or a lower one—embracing violence as a tool to make David's kingdom great again. It's a choice between transformation that occurs through those who are capable of receiving God's surprises—a transformation of the heart, or the kind of force and power that can never lead to a changed heart.

There were four people from this church that attended Turnaround 180 conference in Dewitt on Thursday. And during one of the plenary sessions Rod Kalajainan said something that reminded me of those stone masons I mentioned at the opening of the sermon. He said that how we understand our role in the ministry of the church makes all the difference. When someone asks you what you do at the church and you say "I am a Sunday school teacher" may be accurate and true, but what if you said, "I serve in a way that reveals the love of God for children, and it will change their entire lives as they too will grow to love God and neighbor because they experience Christ's love in their own lives." There's a big difference in the two.

There's also a big difference between printing that we are working to create a church where children and youth love to attend and are here to connect people with the life and love of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and actually doing so as we sometimes worry about room colors and other physical issues more than we do building a genuine relationship with someone who is new to the congregation or making accommodations in our own attitudes for the little ones Jesus calls us to emulate. Are we willing to let go of our preferences, our comfort--to sacrifice in other words--in order to be the presence of Jesus for others? Are we willing to be last in order to be first or serve in order to be great as God's kingdom defines it?

We have choices to make as we stand in the crowd or with the religious leaders or with Pilate and see the One who alone reveals the power of God's love, who calls us to love God and

neighbor as he does, as he reveals that the first is last and the last is first in God's kingdom, who—again—refuses to use force to make us conscious of God. What choice will you make?