

PEOPLE CAN CHANGE: ONE WHO WOULDN'T

Fifth in series: "People Can Change!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
April 15, 1984 Matthew 27:15-26

Hello. My name is Pontius Pilate. That's right. I was the Roman governor of Judea when Jesus died. That fellow over there read in that book on the stand about the incident. I've always felt sorry about the trial. Jesus never really was convicted. I feel sorry about the whole thing, but what could I do? I had no choice.

I've been misjudged by the church for almost 2000 years. I've been maligned, criticized, held up to contempt, called weak, but what could I do? It is easy for you to judge me as one who couldn't rise to the occasion and do something noble and just. It is easy for you to say I could have changed from a vacillating, political, wishy-washy administrator to a man of courage, decisiveness; a man who could have saved Jesus, a man who would have been remembered with respect throughout history, rather than with contempt. It's easy for you to say I had an opportunity to change and wouldn't take it, but you weren't there!

I want to tell you my side of the story. I asked the pastor here if I could talk to you. I've heard that you are an understanding congregation. I've heard that you are not judgmental, but will give me a hearing. May I tell you my side?

I even had my wife on my case! She interrupted me (just like a wife) right during the trial with a message saying she had had a dream and that I should have nothing to do with this man Jesus because he was good and just. Now, what did she expect me to do? On the basis of her dream, I was supposed to act?? I was the governor. I had to deal with the case. I did the best I could, didn't I?

Of course, I knew the charges were false. It was so blatantly obvious they were just out to get him. Evidently, he had been stirring up the people who were beginning to believe he was the Messiah. That wasn't so bad in itself, but Jesus was criticizing the Jewish leaders. I could see that. The Sanhedrin--the Council of the religious leaders--had convicted him of blasphemy. They said he was claiming to be equal with God. Evidently, that was really a challenge to their authority, so they tried to get rid of him, but of course, they couldn't execute him.

Maybe you don't understand how the courts worked. The Roman Empire was in control of Judea; Judea was a province within the Empire. But, Rome wanted the local people to cooperate, so they let the local folks have as much power as seemed wise. Especially in Judea, we let the religious leaders rule their people in religious matters. We didn't antagonize them any more than was absolutely necessary. But, Rome would not allow the local leaders to use the death penalty. That was too serious. So, they had to bring Jesus to me, the Roman governor, for sentencing.

They brought him to me with the accusation that he was encouraging the people not to pay taxes, and claiming to be King of the Jews. They tried to make me believe that he was a revolutionary trying to overthrow the Roman government. I knew the charges were trumped up just to get me to do their dirty work for them but what could I do? They had the people on their side.

Have you ever tried to make a decision that was in opposition to what a mob of angry citizens wanted? I mean, they were angry--loud, demanding. It just wasn't worth the effort to argue with them. They demanded that I crucify this Jesus. They were so sure he was an enemy of the state and an enemy of their religion. I was quite sure they

were acting out of jealousy and fear, but I wasn't that sure. I mean, how could I be sure? Maybe he was guilty. Maybe they were right. Why take the risk and go against them? After all, a good principle of leadership is to avoid risks as much as possible. Do what is easier. Do what is safer. Alienate as few people as possible. Do what requires the least amount of risk. You understand that, don't you? You talk about being changed into a man of courage and principle, but let's be realistic.

Look at it this way. I had to think of my career. I was busy trying to make a name for myself. I wanted to advance. I was young. Do you think I could take a chance and make a bad name for myself back in Rome? Do you think I wanted to spend the rest of my life in Jerusalem? No one wanted to be the governor in Jerusalem. Oh, you took the job if you had to, if you wanted to use it as a stepping stone to a better position. Judea was a hot, dry, dirty country. We called it the armpit of the Roman Empire. Oh, I understand the modern nation of Israel has really turned that country around, irrigating, growing crops, making people proud of their country. But, at the time I lived, it was the pits. Not only was it an awful place to live, but the people were something else. They had these crazy religious ideas: you couldn't eat this; you couldn't work on Saturday; if you said the wrong thing, you were accused of being a blasphemer. Really weird people.

Besides that, things were always tense. It was a hotbed of discontent. Revolution was a common household word. They were ready to overthrow the Roman government at any time. I had the soldiers ready to go on alert at a moment's notice. Fanatics called Zealots were always stirring things up.

Who would want to be governor in such a place? I wanted to go to Alexandria, or Athens, or back to Rome and work in a nice, easy government job in the Pentagon or in the State Department.

You probably think I had some other options. You probably think I could have acted differently and saved him. You probably think I could have handled the crowd and the Sanhedrin and released Jesus. But, I had to keep things quiet. That was my assignment: to keep things calm and peaceful. Would you have wanted letters going to the Bishop (I mean, Emperor) from the local leaders criticizing your actions?

And, how did I know he was so special? I ask you, did I know he was special? Did I know an entire movement would grow up in his name, and people some 1,000 years later would gather in a beautiful building like this in his honor? Did I know he was special? Why blame me?

After all, I did give them a choice. I gave the crowd and the leaders a choice. I'm not inhuman. I knew he was innocent. I didn't enjoy putting an innocent man to death on a cross. So, I looked for a loophole. That is another important principle in leadership. Look for a loophole. Avoid making a direct decision whenever possible. Let someone else take the blame. I looked for a loophole. It was the custom each spring for the governor to release someone from prison. Usually it was a political prisoner; someone who had been stirring up the people and was popular. I gave them the choice of Barabbas, a real stinker, or Jesus, thinking that surely they would choose Jesus. But, they didn't. Is that my fault?

I even washed my hands of the whole affair. I thought that would be a dramatic touch to get them to come to their senses. I had a bowl of water brought, and I washed my hands and said, "The blood of this innocent man is on your heads." I absolved myself of the responsibility. Yet, people for centuries have insisted that I

should have accepted the responsibility and acted responsibly. I suppose I could have handled the crowd if I had been more decisive and had exerted leadership as the Roman governor, but listen, I was your typical administrator, your typical politician, your typical chairman. Don't rock boats. Don't take risks. Find loopholes. Get someone else to take the blame.

You accuse me of letting Jesus down, of not being able to stand by him and for him. What about you? Have you ever let Jesus down? What have you done for Jesus? What are you doing now for Jesus? Do you stand up for the poor as he did? Do you feed the hungry? Do you work for peace? Do you risk, take chances, risk alienating friends and powerful people for the sake of peace, for what is right? Or, are you also timid, wishy-washy, spineless. You understand now, don't you? I had the chance to change. I had the chance to act courageously. But, I had no choice. I had my career at stake.

Jesus talked about truth to me. He said he had come to bear witness to the truth, to show the truth. I asked him, "What is truth?" I guess truth is when you see yourself as you really are. I look in the mirror. I see the truth about me, and I don't like what I see. I feel guilty, dirty, and weak. I wish I could sleep at night. I wish I could find peace. I just walk around, trying to convince people, trying to convince myself that I had no choice, that I couldn't change.

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