

John 19:12-16
6th Lenten Midweek Service
Sermon Series: Ironies of the Passion
We Have No King but Ceasar!

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
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¹² From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

¹³ When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge’s seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). ¹⁴ It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

¹⁵ But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

¹⁶ Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

“I can’t believe he said that!” I’m not so sure how many more shock and awe statements I can tolerate listening to from our different political candidates. Politics is one of the only fields I know that someone will contradict everything he or she has ever stood for just because it might bump them up in the polls. A politician, who has opposed raising taxes for decades, suddenly comes out with a plan to raise taxes because that’s the way the political wind is blowing. You can’t believe your ears, because this guy has made his reputation as a tax cutter. But now he figures the only way to win an election is to argue for the things he’s always been against. Of course, his opponent won’t be shy to point out the irony of his flip-flop. Tonight, we have before us that kind of a political shift. The Jewish leadership completely flipped sides by saying, “We have no king but Caesar.”

These words were the final argument in a dispute between Pilate and the Jewish chief priests. With these words, “we have no king but Caesar,” the priests won. Or so they thought.

This argument began early that morning when the Jewish leadership showed up at Pilate’s palace to persuade him to carry out the death sentence they had passed on Jesus only a few hours before. But Pilate wasn’t going to let them dictate whom he executed. So he questioned Jesus personally. It didn’t take him long to figure out that Jesus was innocent. Pilate held the real power in Jerusalem. He was supported by Roman troops and Roman law. The Jewish leaders had to persuade Pilate because they did not have the legal authority to execute Jesus.

So these two forces squared off. Pontius Pilate was a Roman, a Gentile. He knew very little about Jewish religion, and he probably didn’t care to know any more than that. Pilate was loyal to Rome. He was there to enforce Roman law, to collect Roman taxes, and to protect Roman borders. At heart, Pilate was a cynic. He didn’t believe in truth. The chief priests were different in almost every way. They hated the Romans. They considered all Gentiles to be

beneath them. They despised the Roman Empire. Given a chance, they would've rebelled and set up an independent country in a heartbeat. Their lives revolved around the hair-splitting controversies of the Jewish sects. However, they were all convinced that the God of Israel was the one true God.

Jesus, of course, was a Jew, but the Jewish religious leaders wanted him dead. They didn't care whether he was guilty or not. They were even willing to invent charges just to get rid of him. But the gentile governor—the man who said, “What is truth?”—that was the man who wanted justice for Jesus. So, again and again, Pilate tried to find a way to set him free. He remembered the custom of releasing a prisoner for the Passover and offered Jesus to the crowd. He even had him flogged and then brought back out in hopes that the crowd would feel sorry for him. He argued with the priests and the Jewish mob in front of the palace. But in the end, he could not escape from the logic of their argument: Jesus claimed to be a king. That meant he was in rebellion against Caesar. If Pilate freed him, Pilate would be taking the enemy's side. Jesus had to be crucified. It was the Roman way. That forced Pilate to put him on trial publicly. When Pilate asked, “Shall I crucify your king?” the chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” With that stunning answer, Pilate sent Jesus to die.

The only way Pilate could've resisted this drive to murder Jesus would've been if he himself was willing to risk everything for Christ. His career, indeed his very life, was on the line once the chief priests mentioned Caesar. In the end, Pilate would not risk anything to save an innocent man. Isn't that human nature? You take care of yourself first. That is, in fact, the difference between Jesus and everyone else in this story. Jesus alone was willing to lay down his life for the good of others.

If we imagine ourselves in his place, we almost can't help but daydream that we would have stood up to the Jewish leaders, even if it meant punishment. Most of us probably won't ever find ourselves in a situation like that. Rather, every day we have the opportunity to sacrifice our lives for God in the love we show to one another. When you look at our real lives, are we any more willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others than Pilate was? Sacrificing ourselves for others is the core of real Christian love. Are we willing to sacrifice everything for God? For the truth? For the good of people who don't deserve it and who would never make such a sacrifice for us?

It sure is easier to save ourselves. We tell little white lies that keep us out of trouble. We avoid making eye contact with people who need our help until we're out of range. We wait for the right moment to talk about Jesus, and, strangely, the right moment never seems to come. We act friendly, but we don't really put ourselves out there for our neighbor, and we never really risk anything for the cause of Christ. Does that sound like you?

In love, Jesus endured this endless debate for people like us. For him, this was one more step to the cross, one more step to dying and rising and setting us free. He could've put a stop to it at any moment. But he didn't. He played along while these little men argued and debated, knowing how it was going to end. Then he died. The miracle in all this is that God counts that perfect, self-sacrificing love of Christ as ours. He looks at Jesus and says that you and I have

loved God and one another because Jesus did. And just as miraculous, God counts that death as our payment for sin. When Jesus died on that cross, his blood washed away all our selfishness, all the lies we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better, all our guilt for all the times we put ourselves first. Because Jesus suffered our death and our hell, God has forgiven those sins.

We have no king but Caesar. These words are a sad comment on life without faith. The chief priests hated Caesar. Jerusalem had a reputation for being one of the hardest places in the Roman Empire to rule, because the Jews were convinced that they were the people of God and that God would help them if they revolted—and they tried over and over again. “We have no king but Caesar” was a lie they never thought would pass their lips. So why did they say it? They wanted to trap Pilate into doing what they wanted.

However, there was a deeper meaning to it. Jesus was the true King of Israel. God had been promising for a thousand years to send a son of King David to rule his people. Jesus was that Son of David, that Messiah. All Jewish hopes focused on him. Abraham had looked forward in faith to the day of Christ, and every true son of Abraham trusted in him. When these men rejected Jesus and said they had no king but Caesar, they denied the faith and removed themselves from the people of God.

In every person’s heart there is a king. There is a king or Caesar that rules all our hopes and dreams. That king is supposed to be Jesus. His Word and his love are supposed to be the end all and be all of our existence. But for most people, the king is something else. Even for us Christians, when we were born, the king was something else. It was us and our pleasure and convenience. And even to this day, the old king of our hearts still wants his job back.

It would take surprisingly little for you and me to join these men in denying all that we have confessed and in claiming a false god as our king. No sinner has the strength to remain faithful to Christ on his or her own. The devil is constantly looking for that moment of weakness when he can pull us away from Christ and back into his kingdom. If you don’t believe how easy it could be, find a member of this church who you know used to come faithfully but who has now drifted away. Ask how hard it was to get out of the habit of coming to church.

Have no fear. The same Jesus who could’ve stopped this joke of a trial at any time is in control of our lives too. He has given us faith, and he promises he will keep that faith alive. Trust in him. When you see how easy it is to let something else become the driving force in your life, when you fear for your faith, that’s when Jesus says, “I am here. I love you. I have forgiven you. I have given you my word to strengthen you. I have given you Baptism and Communion to keep your faith alive. I have given you a pastor to hear your confession and to comfort you with my love and forgiveness. I have given you fellow members to encourage you. I will never leave you or forsake you. If you ever doubt my love, look back on that ridiculous day when these little men thought they were doing what they wanted. All along, they were bringing me to the cross so that I could die for you. My blood has washed all your sin and weakness away. I live in you, and I will bring you home.”

God has given us the one thing Pilate and the chief priests lacked—faith in Christ. So he has put a new King in our hearts. Yes, that King has rivals. All the sin and all the pleasures of

this life tempt us, but Jesus is still the King. He reigns through the message of his love. Trust in him. Amen.