

**March 24, 2021 -- 6th Wednesday in Lent Pastor Wolfgramm-St. Paul Lutheran
Hands of the Passion #6 - Matthew 27:15-26**

Have you ever had a disagreement in your family? A disagreement about something important. One spouse says, “I think we are spending way too much money on Christmas gifts. We need to cut back.” Or someone says, “I think we should sell our house right now and move to Florida.”

When *Christians* have a disagreement, they ordinarily calm down. They talk it over. They pray about it. And in due time they usually reach a God-pleasing decision.

But what happens when *unbelievers* have a disagreement? We have an example before us this evening. Two groups of people are shouting at each other. One group consists of the Jewish religious leaders. The other group consists of only one man – the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Ironically these unbelievers are arguing about religion. The question is, “What should we do with Jesus?” At this moment the mob of unbelieving Jews is winning the argument. Pilate is trying hard to defend himself. This evening, as we again consider “Hands of the Passion,” we see

Pontius Pilate and His Hands of Self-Defense

TEXT: Matthew 27:15-26

¹⁵ Now it was the governor’s custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. ¹⁶ At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” ¹⁸ For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

¹⁹ While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.”

²⁰ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

²¹ “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor. “Barabbas,” they answered.

²² “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked. They all answered, “Crucify him!”

²³ “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”

²⁵ All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

I. How it all started

This story began the night before, on the evening of Maundy Thursday. The Jewish leaders had arrested Jesus and put Him on trial. They spent several hours listening to false witnesses. Then the High Priest finally got to the point. He asked Jesus a clear, simple question: “Are you the Christ, the Son of God?” And Jesus gave a clear, simple answer: “Yes, I am. And you will see me again when I return in power and glory.”

But the Jewish leaders refused to believe those words.

Now it is early in the morning of Good Friday. Jesus is in the courtroom of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate asks Jesus a clear, simple question. It was similar to the question of the high priest: “Who are you? Are You really the Christ, the King of the Jews?” And Jesus gave Pilate a clear, simple answer: “Yes, sir, I am a king. But my Kingdom is not of this world. In fact, I myself am not from this world. I entered this world from heaven. I came into this world to speak the truth, words that come directly from the mouth of God.”

But Pilate (just like the Jewish leaders) refused to believe our Lord’s words.

So, the people on the stage this evening – the Jews and the Gentiles – have a lot in common. All of them have stood face-to-face with Jesus. All of them have heard Jesus declare that He is the Son of God from heaven. All of them have deliberately rejected our Savior’s words.

They disagree on only one point: “What are we going to do now?” The Jewish leaders say that Jesus must be put to death. Pilate said, “No, Jesus does not deserve to die.” At this moment Pilate is on the defensive. We watch as Pilate tries to wiggle himself out of a jam, as Pilate tries to defend his unbelief before the Jewish leaders and before God.

II. Pilate’s tricks

Pilate uses a series of 6 tricks. We will look at each of them.

#1 Release a Prisoner

It was the custom that, during the Passover festival, the Roman governor would release a prisoner. It seems that the choice was ordinarily wide open. The Jewish people would choose a prisoner whom they thought deserved a second chance. But this year it would be different. Pilate was about to play Trick #1. Pilate himself would do the choosing. He ordered his soldiers to go down into the prison and bring up the worst criminal in his jail – a man named Barabbas. (Everyone recognized that name. The word “Barabbas” was enough to fill their hearts with fear.) Pilate would then permit the Jews to choose between good and evil; between a man who was the embodiment of all that is good and a man who was the embodiment of all that is evil. Pilate was sure that the Jews would choose the good, the Good Man.

As a matter of fact Pilate was not giving the Jews a choice. His words were a threat. Pilate was saying, “If you do not choose Jesus, I am going to release Barabbas. And if I put Barabbas back on the street, you better lock your doors and windows.”

But Trick #1 did not work. The Jewish mob started shouting, “We want Barabbas!” We will take anyone – but not Jesus.

Pilate was surprised. But their choice need not surprise us. By nature human hearts are opposed to God, they are “hostile to God.” (Rom 8:7)

#2 Mrs. Pilate’s dream

Trick #1 had failed. But along came Trick #2. Pilate’s wife had had a dream. She considered her dream so important that she interrupted her husband while he was at work, at the moment while he was “sitting on the judgment seat” (27:19). Her message was, “Pilate, have nothing to do with that innocent man. I have suffered many things in a dream because of Him.” (27:19)

Those are dangerous words; dangerous because they are a half-truth. “Yes, you are right, Mrs. Pilate. Jesus is an ‘innocent man.’ His life was perfect from beginning to end.”

“At the same time, Mrs. Pilate your advice is false.” If someone *knows* that Jesus is an “innocent man,” if someone *knows* that He is the Holy Son of God, it is not possible for you to “have nothing to do with Him.” Jesus once said, “Whoever is not with Me is against me.” (Mt 12:30) Being lukewarm is dangerous business. On Judgment Day Jesus will say to certain people, “Because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” (Rev 3:16)

#3 Ask for advice

Even Pilate did not take time to consider the words of his wife. He moved on to trick #3. He asked the crowd of unbelievers for advice. “What shall I do then with Jesus?” (27:22) In effect he was saying, “Jesus has told me that He ‘came from God,’ and that He came into our world to ‘speak the truth.’ What should I do now? Do you unbelievers have any suggestions?”

“Pilate, asking the world for spiritual advice is never a good idea. The thinking of this world and the thinking of God are exact opposites.”

We are not surprised when the mob’s advice was, “Let Him be crucified!” (27:22) Pilate, you and the Romans are good at putting people to death. That is what we want for this man. Death by crucifixion!”

#4 Innocent! Wash hands.

Now Pilate is in trouble. We can see him holding up his hands in self-defense as he presents trick #4. We can hear him saying, “Okay, okay. Have it your way. I will give the order that Jesus be crucified. But – I want everyone to know that this was not my idea. If Jesus dies, I do not want anyone pointing fingers at me.” Then Pilate asked for a bowl of water. He publicly washed his hands and declared, “I am innocent of the blood of this just man.” (27:24)

We answer, “Pilate, what do you mean, telling us that you are innocent? Now you are talking just like the Pharisee in the temple. The Pharisee declared that he was innocent, that he had kept all of God’s commandments. But that Pharisee did not fool God. And, Pilate, you are not fooling God either.”

“Pilate, when you washed your hands with water, some of us thought about the washing of Holy Baptism. In the Sacrament of Baptism God does wash away sin. But, Pilate, your washing, your ‘baptism,’ is a fraud. Your soap and water might protect you from COVID; but you need more than hand sanitizer to wash away your sin.”

“And, Pilate, when you washed your hands with water, some of us thought of how Jesus washed the feet of His disciples in the Upper Room. When Jesus approached Peter with that pan of water, Peter said, ‘Lord you will never wash my feet!’ Jesus replied, ‘Peter, if I do not wash you, you have no part with me.’ Pilate, Jesus could well say the thing to you. ‘If I do not wash you, Pilate, you have no part with Me. Pilate, without Me you have no forgiveness and no eternal life.’ (Jn 13:8)

#5 Transfer the guilt

Pilate had one more trick in his bag, Trick #5. He would try to transfer his guilt to someone else. Pilate declared, “I am innocent of the blood of this man. You see to it.” (27:24) And the Jewish crowd gave a willing response. “Pilate, that’s fine with us. ‘May the blood of Jesus be on us and on our children.’ (27:25) Yes, Pilate, on Judgment Day we will plead guilty of your sins. We will bear the punishment you deserved.”

We respond, “Pilate, that trick will not work. It is not possible for you to transfer your sin and guilt to the Jewish people. The Jewish people cannot act as your substitute on Judgment Day. But, Pilate, God has provided a Substitute for you and for all of us. That Substitute is standing in front of you. Jesus is ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’ (Jn 1:29) In one of our hymns we sing, “I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God.” (CW 372) We do not sing, “I lay my sins in the Jewish crowd.”

#6 On Judgment Day

That brings us to the final trick, Trick #6. This trick is not recorded in our text. Rather it is a trick that Pilate and millions of others will try on Judgment Day. As the unbelievers stand there at the left hand of Jesus, they will again raise their hands in self-defense. They will cry out, “Lord, when did we ever see you in need and refuse to help you? We always did good things and never did bad things.”

But that trick also will fail. Jesus will answer by saying, “Depart from me.”

III. Meaning for our life

The tricks in Pilate’s bag are familiar. People use those same tricks today. Perhaps we ourselves have tried one or the other.

This evening, Jesus says to us, “Pilate, Wolfram, all the rest of you, your tricks are not fooling God. Put down your hands of self-defense. Instead fold your hands and listen carefully to the words I spoke. I told the Jewish leaders, ‘Yes, I am the son of God; and because I am the Son of God, I have the authority to act as your Judge on the last

day.” Those words are a warning. They are also an invitation: “Yes, I will return in glory. But, Jewish brothers, it is not yet too late. ‘Repent and believe the gospel.’ (Mk 1:15) ‘God did not send Me into the world to condemn the world, but to save it.’” (Jn 3:17)

“Then listen carefully to the words I spoke to Pontius Pilate. I said to Pilate, ‘Sir, I entered this world from heaven, from the right hand of God. My words come from the lips of God Himself.’” Yes, those words are a warning. They are also an invitation. Jesus was saying, “Pilate, sir, right now is your opportunity to hear and believe the truth. ‘Repent and believe the gospel.’ ‘God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance and have eternal life.’” (2 Peter 3:9)

And, as we put down our hands of self-defense, we stand with the tax collector in the temple, and say, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.”

And we add the words, “Lord Jesus, thank You for coming into our world; for acting as our Substitute, for paying for our sins. Thank you for choosing us to be your disciples. Now keep all of us faithful to you until we see you face to face in glory.”
Amen.