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The Gospel of Luke
LXVII. Pilate, Herod, and Barabbas
Luke 23:1-25

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According to the Gospels, the first three commands Jesus issued were Repent, Believe, and Follow Me.¹ Taken together these three commands tell us a lot, not only about Jesus' mission on earth, but also about what it means for us to become involved in that mission as His disciples. Repent, Believe, and Follow Me. Together they indicate that there must be a break with life as it has been – that Jesus has come to inaugurate a new way of living which is deeply counter-cultural, deeply different from how we may have been living before we began to take Jesus seriously and before we began seriously seeking to be His disciples.

Repent – literally, in the Greek, it means to turn your mind around. Eugene Peterson has a great summary of this command to repent. He says that repentance “*is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts.*”² Repent – turn your mind around until it is facing God. And then Believe – meaning trust that what Jesus teaches is the true story about our life in this world. That what Jesus teaches is how it really is – and how we really can best live. Believe – take your truth from Jesus and trust that He is right. And then Follow Me – meaning to put it all into practice, that repentance and that truth. Start trying to live the Jesus way, every day.

The Jesus way, every day – that is the heart of what it means to be His disciple, the heart of what it means to play our part in the great Kingdom mission He has let loose in this world. And I think our Scripture this morning points us in that same direction – though, perhaps, from a negative perspective. In that, as we see Pilate, Herod, and Barabbas in our passage this morning, what we see are three ways of living which are not the way of Jesus. And as we watch Jesus in His encounters with Pilate, Herod, and Barabbas, we are therefore able to see even more clearly how His way differs. In the contrast between the ways of these three and the way of Jesus, we see even more clearly what it means for us to repent, to believe, and to follow Jesus – to live the Jesus way, every day.

The way of Pilate. The way of Pilate is the way of moral expediency in pursuit of earthly prosperity. The Jewish leadership, having reached their false conviction of Jesus³, now drag Him over to Pilate to get Him executed. The Jewish leadership can convict Jesus, but only the Roman government can execute Him. So when the Jewish leadership presents Him to Pilate, you can see how they change the accusation in hopes that it will get Pilate's attention. They convicted Him of claiming to be the Messiah, but to Pilate they say, “*We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.*” Pilate seems

less than impressed – but then again, Pilate must have been having quite a week at this point. Passover weekend, Jerusalem overcrowded and ready to go up like a powder keg. And here comes the Jewish leadership all worked up over what is clearly, to Pilate, some sort of internal religious squabble. Pilate needed this like a hole in the head.

But let's not feel too sorry for Pilate. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent – three times he says so. He even tries to buy off the Jewish leadership by telling them He will have Jesus beaten before releasing Him. But the cries for crucifixion only grow louder. So what does Pilate do? He gives in. He knows Jesus is innocent and does not deserve to die. But once it becomes clear to him that sticking with the truth might cost him a riot in the streets of Jerusalem, which could well cost him his job when Rome hears about it – what then does Pilate do? He chooses the path of least resistance, the path of moral expediency, he goes along to get along so he can continue to enjoy what he clearly values most – not personal and moral integrity, but worldly success!

The way of Pilate is the way of moral expediency in support of worldly success. Flexible morality, we might call it; a powerful impulse to compromise whatever is right whenever compromise is simply the easiest way to get ahead. Christians on Sunday, whatever it takes to get ahead on Monday. Let's call it Chameleon Christianity – able to change our values in an instant. The easier way, the path of least resistance, going along to get along. And Jesus certainly talked about this. He said, *“For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”*⁴

And therein lies the contrast between the way of Pilate and the way of Jesus and His true disciples. The way of Jesus is not the way of moral silly-putty, just reflecting back to the world what the world wants to see in us. Rather the way of Jesus is the way of uncompromising obedience – reflecting back to God what God wants to see in us. Jesus could have gone in a different direction. He could have compromised with the religious leadership, agreed with them that maybe He had taken things a bit too far and promising that He would try to tone it down a bit in the future – and they might have let Him go. He could have cut a deal with Pilate to save His skin. But Jesus' moral compass is rock-steady and incorruptible. *“Not my will, but thine be done,”*⁵ He had prayed to the Father. And that is the path He has pursued from the beginning; and that is the path He will pursue all the way to the end. The path of uncompromising obedience to the Father.

And it is this way of Jesus, this path of uncompromising obedience – no matter the cost – which He is hoping to see in us, His disciples. Not the way of Pilate, which is the way of the world as a whole, which is the way of moral expediency in pursuit of earthly ends. The way of uncompromising obedience to the will of God, and expressed in the teachings of Jesus. C. S. Lewis once put it this way, that the path of joy – despite all our intimations to the contrary – winds through an extravagant, reckless, self-denial in service to the will of God. In his book, Surprised by Joy, he writes:

*Give up your self, and you will find your real self.
Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of
your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your*

whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being and your will. Find eternal life.

Keep back nothing . . . Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything [good] thrown in.⁶

The way of Herod. Once Pilate hears Jesus is a Galilean, he tries to drop this problem of Jesus onto Herod. Herod had actually long wanted to meet Jesus. Back in Luke 9, when Herod first heard about the things Jesus was doing, he had a moment of panic that maybe John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, had come back from the dead.⁷ By Luke 13, Herod had already decided that Jesus needed to die just like John the Baptist.⁸ But now, for the first time, mighty King Herod gets the chance to meet Jesus face to face. And what a disappointment this Jesus turns out to be. Herod commands Jesus to do some tricks, some miracles, some mighty signs – and Jesus will not even speak to him. This Jesus has the nerve not to obey mighty King Herod. So Herod and his soldiers decide to put Jesus in His place. They dress Him up in royal clothing – as if this Jesus really were some kind of king. And then they beat Him and mock Him, just to show Him who is really boss.

And that's the way of Herod – it's the way of power. After all, Herod is a big deal. He is large and charge over just about all of that region. Even Pilate is deferential to him. And just look on his works, ye mighty, and despair. King Herod had built roads, towns – he had built seven palaces, each one bigger than the palace of mighty Caesar in Rome! And Herod had an army – an undefeated army. Power, Herod had power – real world, bow down before him in fear sort of power. For Herod, power is what it's all about – getting it, using it, abusing it. And when Jesus, the One with, supposedly, the supernatural power to do miracles, shows Himself to be just another powerless imposter (or so Herod thinks) – well then, there's nothing left to do but to humiliate Him in His powerlessness.

But that's just it, isn't it – what Jesus was doing before Herod. That the way of Jesus is not power the way Herod thinks of it, but rather the power of His humility. He doesn't need to prove Himself to anyone – and He certainly will not play along with Herod's little game. The way of Jesus is the way of humility. Jesus could have played Herod's power game – in fact, He would easily have won if He had. At best, Herod had a bunch of Roman soldiers – Jesus had the entire angel army of heaven waiting for His command. But that's not how Jesus came to do things. He came not for the display of His divine power – so that we might fear Him, bow down before Him in terror. He came wearing the humble garments of our human flesh, so that He would not frighten us in His divinity, but so that He might be able to win us to Himself freely in His humanity – of our own will and desire to choose to be His. He came not to compel us, but to persuade us. That is the way of Jesus. He does not compel us with His divine power, rather He woos us with His amazing grace – His long-suffering grace and kindness, patience and love. Indeed, the great mystery of our faith, as one theologian puts it, is precisely this, that . . .

. . . to redeem our brokenness and lovelessness the God who suffers with us did not strike some mighty blow of power but sent his

*beloved son to suffer like us, through his suffering to redeem us from suffering and evil.*⁹

Which means the way of the disciples of Christ is also to be marked by humility. We are not called to bully and frighten others onto the side of Christ. We are here, as Jesus was when He was here – we are here to win the world over to Christ through our own demonstration of His humility, of His kindness and His patience and His compassion. One way to think of this lies in what Paul writes to the Philippians: “*Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*”¹⁰ Or, as Eugene Peterson translates this same verse in The Message:

*Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*¹¹

The way of Herod is the way of self-serving power. The way of Jesus, and therefore of the disciples of Jesus, is the way of self-forgetting service – humility in action.

And now we come to the way of Barabbas. The way of Barabbas is the way of hatred and violence. And that's why the crowd chose him over Jesus – the world is in love with hatred and violence, and sees it as the answer to most anything which troubles us. Think of how violence is glorified as the answer in our popular culture – think of every superhero movie, every police drama, even actors slapping other actors at the Academy Awards. Hatred and violence. Think of how prevalent hatred and violence have become in our real, day-to-day culture. Barabbas had simply given the people what they wanted. They hated the Romans and wanted them gone, so Barabbas had gone out and killed some Romans. And what had Jesus done for the crowd? When one of His disciples pulled out a sword and struck the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus had actually rebuked that disciple, saying to him, “*No more of this!*”¹² Which sounds a whole lot like, “*Not like this!*” – because the way of Jesus is clearly not the way of hatred and violence. The way of Jesus is the way of love.

And nowhere do we see that way of Jesus better than in that very moment of His sentence and Barabbas' release. Barabbas is the guilty one, remember. He had actually committed a crime deserving of death under Roman law. But Jesus, willingly and without protest, takes Barabbas' place on the cross. He was the Son of God, which means it could have been different! But the innocent One chooses to die in the place of the guilty one, so that the guilty one may live and may go free. Which, of course, is precisely the meaning of the cross for us all: the innocent One willingly, out of love for us, chooses to die in the place of the guilty ones – you and me – so that the guilty ones may live and may go free. “*Greater love has no one than this,*” Jesus had told His disciples, “*that someone lays down his life for his friends.*”¹³ Jesus lays down His life for Barabbas – guilty before the Romans and deserving of death. Jesus lays down His life for you and me – all of us guilty before God and deserving of eternal death. But Jesus, in love, takes our place. “*Greater love has no one than this . . .*”

The way of Jesus is the way of love. And for the disciples of Jesus, therefore, our way in this world is to be marked by love – even and especially in a world so marked by hatred and violence. This is one of my favorites stories, and I have shared it with you a number of times before. It just comes down so simply and clearly on this point. It’s a story told by Christopher de Vinck in his book, The Power of the Powerless:

One spring afternoon my five-year-old son, David, and I were planting raspberry bushes along the side of the garage . . . A neighbor joined us for a few moments . . . David pointed to the ground . . . Look Daddy! What’s that?” I stopped talking with my neighbor and looked down.

“A beetle,” I said.

David was impressed and pleased with the discovery of this fancy, colorful creature. My neighbor lifted his foot and stepped on the insect giving his shoe an extra twist in the dirt. “That ought to do it,” he laughed.

David looked up at me, waiting for an explanation, a reason . . . That night, just before I turned off the light in his bedroom, David whispered, “I liked that beetle, Daddy.”

“I did too,” I whispered back.¹⁴

Da Vinck concludes his story by writing, “*We have the power to choose.*” We have the power to choose how we will respond to every living thing, especially every single person that we meet every single day – to choose whether to stomp upon them in hatred or violence, or to choose the Jesus way, which is to walk with them in love. Welcome them in love. See them and treat them out of the same love with which Jesus has first loved us. For Love is the Jesus way. And love is the way His Kingdom will come at last on this earth, as it is in heaven.

¹ See Mark 1:14-17.

² Eugene H. Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980), pp. 25-26.

³ Luke 22:66-71.

⁴ Matthew 7:13-14.

⁵ Luke 22:42.

⁶ Quoted in William H. Willimon, “Praise for the Passionate,” Pulpit Resource, Vol. 34, No. 4 (October, November, December 2006), p. 32.

⁷ Luke 9:7-9.

⁸ Luke 13:31-33.

⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 81-82.

¹⁰ Philippians 2:3-4.

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2138.

¹² Luke 22:51.

¹³ John 15:13.

¹⁴ Quoted in Sue Monk Kidd, “Birthing Compassion,” in Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, Vol. V, No. 6 (November/December, 1990), p. 148.