

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
March 27, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: John 18:28-38

Sermon: Faith on Trial (Lent 4)

What. Have. You. done?

A woman posted a long message on Facebook last week, letting her friends and family know that she and her partner were “taking a break” from their marriage. They are starting a trial separation, a time for re-thinking whether they actually want to spend the rest of their lives together. “We’ve never been a perfect match, she wrote, over thirty years of marriage and parenting, we’ve had stresses and strains. We love each other, but I have started to question whether we just want different things in the future.”

The breaking point came when she was reviewing the bank statement and questioned one of the expenses listed there. No, it wasn’t a shady hotel bill, it wasn’t evidence of addictive gambling or drinking or drug use. It was a contribution to a “Go-Fund-Me” page for the truck convey – a fund to support the truckers who, not long ago, clogged up our downtown, protesting against regulations to protect people from the spread of COVID-19.

What have you done? she asked. This one choice that he made caused her to question whether or not she really knew her partner of 30 years.

Faced with her accusation, he would only say: “it was just a momentary lapse... I got caught up in the rhetoric...” Then he said: “Maybe if you take a look at some of the articles I’ve been reading...”

That’s when she started talking about taking a break.

In the scripture reading today, Pilate asked Jesus the same kind of question: “Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Pilate was already feeling manipulated by the religious authorities in Jerusalem, those who wanted to get rid of Jesus. They knew that only the Roman authorities had the power of execution.

It had to be a political execution, however. Pilate had to find political grounds to do as they asked. Was this guy really setting himself up as a king against Caesar? Was he actually seeking to take the place of the collaborator king of the Jews, Herod? Pilate suspected their reason was not political at all. In this moment, he wanted to know why the religious authorities were so determined to end Jesus’ life. “They are your own people!” he mocked Jesus.

What have you done? he asked.

Jesus replied to Pilate, saying: *“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”*

In one of her books, Barbara Brown Taylor asked this hard question: Have you ever heard someone tell the truth about you so clearly that you wanted to kill them to make them stop? If not, she says, let me introduce you to Jesus.

That’s why Pilate asked Jesus “What have you done?”

Jesus answered all Pilate’s questions from a very different perspective: *If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed ... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.*

Jesus did not say to Pilate: I am no threat. I am a holy man, I don’t get involved in politics. Jesus did not say: I am only interested in the after-life, the spiritual things. I’ll let others deal with politics and justice and government.

No, Jesus answered the Roman governor with a different kind of challenge: he never called himself a king, but he did use the word Kingdom, and that was a political word almost guaranteed to get him crucified.

Then Jesus added this – *but it is a kingdom not from here.*

I have always imagined Jesus looking around at that point – taking in the Roman architecture, the guards with their swords, and Pilate with his fancy robes and symbols of power. In the midst of all that, there is Jesus saying: My kingdom is not of THIS world. My kingdom is God’s kingdom: the way of love and prayer, compassion and justice and peace. Jesus’ followers then would not free him with violence, they would find a different way to build God’s kingdom in the face of the Empire.

Of course the church that took Jesus’ name did not always reflect these values: Crusades, religious wars, colonization... At times, we confess that war, violence and exploitation must have seemed the most expedient way to pave a way for the Christian faith in the world. The way that Pilate took.

Perhaps it is fair then that, in our time, it seems like it is our faith that is on trial.

What have you done? the world asks us.

When we consider that the Christian story began with this humble man who refused to play Pilate’s power game, and we compare it to our own priorities, we might agree that it is time for us to return to our roots. In a world that seems so polarized violence is not a fitting tool for followers of Jesus.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote this of his own ministry, as he was promoting Christian non-violence:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

What have you done? Pilate asked Jesus. What could you have done to upset your own people so much that they would deliver you to me in chains, so that I might take your life?

Jesus answered: I came to tell the truth.
Pilate complained: "What IS truth?"

Maybe what Pilate wanted were the kind of facts he could understand: he wanted Jesus to say that he had upset the religious authorities by healing on the sabbath and turning the tables in the temple. Or maybe he wanted Jesus to say I am planning to found a new faith community and the temple elite are jealous of my popularity. Perhaps Pilate even wanted Jesus to say Yes I am a rebel king, I have come to overthrow Caesar's power in this place.

Instead, Jesus had a whole different definition of truth – A truth that was born of God's infinite love for all creation. A truth that was only in competition with the iron fist of the Roman Empire because it offered true and lasting hope.

True hope is inconvenient. It is inconvenient because true hope comes from transformation - and transformation takes a lot of hard work, it takes giving up the way we have always done things, and then learning to share the power that we have enjoyed. It takes listening to those who have never been heard. It sometimes takes being in conflict with our own family, our own friends, our own people.

What have you done?

I say that sometimes it seems like our faith is on trial, because very often people of faith find themselves standing up against the status quo: standing for the most vulnerable in our society. And that contribution is not always welcome.

- People of faith stand up for the environment – Muslims, Sikh, Jewish, and Christians of many different denominations. Creation cannot speak to power, but people of faith can.
- People of faith are allies of those who experience poverty, racism, homophobia and ableism.
- People of faith listen for the truth in the gospel – that God's kingdom gives us a very different way to live in well-being and equity. You will find people of faith volunteering in food banks and healing gardens, in hospice care, in afterschool homework clubs and street ministry.

- Those experiences influence our understanding of truth, and God's kingdom, and how our strength should be used.

What have you done? Pilate asked Jesus.

Maybe what Jesus should I have said was: I have opened their eyes. Now they will never unsee the vision of God's kingdom, they will continue looking for my truth in every problem, in every injustice, in every dark night of the soul.

May we keep seeing the vision, and the possibility of God's kingdom. May God show us a clear path through the choices that are before us. Thanks be to God. Amen