

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

**“In Pilates Shoes”**

**April 17 2011 – Palm Sunday**

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**Matthew 21:1-11**

*21*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> ‘Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,  
‘Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

<sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

**Matthew 27:15-26**

*15* Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. <sup>16</sup>At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. <sup>17</sup>So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ <sup>18</sup>For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. <sup>19</sup>While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.’ <sup>20</sup>Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. <sup>21</sup>The governor again said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’ <sup>22</sup>Pilate said to them, ‘Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’ <sup>23</sup>Then he asked, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’

*24* So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’ <sup>25</sup>Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’ <sup>26</sup>So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

In his book, *How Not to Invent the Wheelbarrow*, author Herb Miller tells a modern day tale. In a large city there was an exotic Asian restaurant serving a very wealthy clientele. The name of the restaurant was "Eddie and the Dragon." One day a beggar came to the back door of the establishment and confronted the restaurant manager, who happened to be a woman. He said, "Could you spare me some food? I haven't eaten in days. I could use even some scraps." The manager yelled back at the beggar, "Never! We don't feed any beggars! You need to leave the premises immediately." The beggar left, but for some reason came back to the door just a few minutes later. Again he confronted the manager, only now she was even angrier. She shouted at the unfortunate man, "What do you want now? Didn't you hear what I told you earlier? We don't feed beggars!" The beggar then looked at the restaurant name painted on the back delivery door, "Eddie and the Dragon." He turned back to the woman, looked her straight in the eyes and said, "This time I was wondering if I could talk to Eddie."

Today is a day that we can look at Eddie, or perhaps at the Dragon. This is Passion Sunday, a day to reflect upon the last week of Jesus' life, his final days in Jerusalem, and his path to the cross. It is a Sunday in which the entire passion narrative is read in many churches while the congregation stands to absorb the full details of the story. Not wanting to hear such sober thoughts, we might knock on the door and ask to speak to the other voice of the day. Today we might choose to celebrate a more joyous occasion-Jesus' victorious ride into the city of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Today we can remember the fulfillment of prophecy. God's day apparently had come.

But today, I have chosen to face the dragon. I think that too often we are tempted to go directly from the Palm Sunday procession to the empty tomb of Easter. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services are not as well attended as Easter or even Palm Sunday. We are much too busy with our other plans to hear the painful part of the story. We tend to forget about the dark fellowship of the Upper Room. We neglect to pray fervently with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. We fail to witness to the abrupt violence of his arrest and trial. We don't want to see the crown of thorns, the tears, the nails, or the blood. However I firmly believe that one cannot embrace the promise of Easter completely without sharing in the solemn nature of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. The dragon must be encountered. Pain and sacrifice and agony and death must be recognized before there can be a full appreciation of God's miracle of resurrection.

The gospel reading for Palm and Passion Sunday is the lengthiest of the entire year. The section we heard from Matthew is but a brief portion of what is supposed to be read this Sunday. Whenever I hear the events of Holy Week as described in the Gospels, I find myself caught up with one of the chief characters. For some reason I am drawn to Pilate. Like Nero or Benedict Arnold or John Wilkes Booth, Pontius Pilate is remembered in history as a bad guy. He has been portrayed as inherently evil, or as a man bent on power and authority. I recall watching *Jeopardy* one night and Pilate's name appeared as within a question in the category of "The Notorious." He was right there with Jesse James and Pol Pot. Do you doubt the importance of Pilate? Consider that except for Jesus and the Virgin Mary, he is the only person mentioned in the centuries old Apostle's Creed. Theologian Karl Barth remarked that Pilate entered the Apostle's Creed somewhat "like a dog into a nice room!"

Pilate does have some sympathizers. Many historical revisionists have excused his actions because he was a victim of political circumstance. Certainly he was in a difficult pinch. First of all he was assigned to Judea. The people in that province were next to impossible to rule. They were unreasonable, rebellious, restless, and fanatic. Someone once wrote that Rome did not govern Judea, she baby-sat that province of the empire. And Pilate's boss was the Roman Emperor Tiberius, a most demanding ruler. Tiberius punished his governors if they mistreated their subjects. Yet on the other hand he always wanted his governors to severely punish anyone guilty of treason. Right away, Pilate knew he was walking a thin line to please his boss.

According to Scripture, Pilate had a gut feeling about Jesus' innocence. He knew that the religious authorities had handed Jesus over to him because of their jealousy. He knew that these authorities were urging him to use political laws in a religious matter. Pilate must have figured out that he was being used- he was being asked to do the dirty work that the chief priests could not do themselves.

Pilate also had some pressure from home. His wife warned him to have nothing to do with this Jesus character. She had dreamed some bad dreams about the whole situation. But Pilate knew that he couldn't run his province based on the bad dreams of his wife.

And there was that awful crowd, standing right outside the palace door, chanting for Jesus' crucifixion. It was an angry mob wanting some kind of action.

It was tough all right! Pilate was swayed by a boss threatening him to do his job right or be fired, a wife nagging him about how to treat a prisoner, and a crowd telling him who he should punish and how.

Pilate looked for a way out. He originally hoped that Jesus would present a strong defense. That failed to happen. When Pilate questioned Jesus, Jesus turned the questions right back to Pilate. He tried to appeal to the crowd, to get them to release Jesus as the special Passover exemption, kind of like using the immunity challenge on *Survivor*. But the people called for Barabbas instead. Finally Pilate ran out of options. With no other apparent choices, he announced the sentence of crucifixion. And then he went out to wash his hands, symbolizing his innocence in the entire matter.

Why was Pilate so notorious anyway? Well, we know that he was the man who officially pronounced the sentence of the cross for Jesus. He was Jesus' last hope for human rescue. He was one of humanity's last chances to recognize the presence of God in this man from Galilee. But Pilate failed. He failed Jesus. He failed the rest of humanity. And because of that he became a villain. Surely we would have done differently if we walked in his shoes. Wouldn't we? Herein lies the important lesson for us this Passion Sunday. What do we do with this Jesus?

Pilate was a pragmatic, expedient, man of order. He did his best to preserve his position. He decided what was right and wrong on the basis of what was best for him at the moment. His self-interest was stronger than his sense of justice. He had no genuine, personal interest in Jesus. He saw value in the man only as he related to the power and authority and order of the province. He wanted to release Jesus but he didn't want to take a personal stand. He seemed to respect Jesus, but certainly not enough to believe in him. He was such a man of the world and a man involved in his own professional and personal concerns that he could not see the very presence of God in front of him. He looked for a security net to save himself when a decision about Jesus offered no middle ground.

What do we do with Jesus, when we stand in Pilate's shoes? It is the question of the ages and the question each person must answer. In the name of expediency, to save our reputation, to make our life more comfortable, to look good in front of our neighbors and our friends, to find more pleasure and satisfaction, to justify our personal decisions, to keep the order of the status quo, to keep a safe distance from the dangers of truly following the man- will we wash our hands and ignore his claim upon our lives with well reasoned neutrality?

Unlike Pilate, we have another chance. We can embrace the truth. We can bring Jesus into our everyday experience, we can acknowledge our need, we can seek to understand his teachings, we can desire his intention for our choices, and we can embrace the change he desires for our life and our world. We can make the effort to take seriously the presence of God that stands before us.

