

We Can Relate

Mark 15:1-15

What kind of a Messiah are you looking for?

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In this Lenten sermon series, we have been retracing the steps of Jesus during the last 24 hours of his life. It was the day that changed the world. If you go to Jerusalem today, there are many places that are approximately where the important events in the life of Christ took place; they say, “if not here, then very near here.” But there are a few places where they can say with some assurance that the feet of Jesus might have stood on that particular spot. I mentioned one last week: the steps from the city of David up the hill to the house of Caiaphas. Those stones are still there.

Another place is part of the Teaching Steps located on the south side of the Temple mount. These steps were where the teachers of Israel gathered to discuss matters of faith. It is where the boy Jesus would have been discussing the Law with his elders, and it is where Jesus would have entered the Temple grounds. The Huldah Gates, as they were called, were closed off by the Muslims at some point, but there is a stone in front of them that was there when the Temple was. Jesus would have stepped on that stone to enter the Temple.

The Old City of Jerusalem today is 20 feet or so above the level of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. In his time, the Antonia Fortress, the headquarters of the Romans, was adjacent to the northwest corner of the Temple. Now the Church of the Condemnation stands there, but under the church, they have excavated down to the level of Roman times. There is a courtyard and a street that archeologists believe is Pilate’s courtyard. This is the spot where Jesus would have been condemned to die and started his journey toward Calvary.

It is an awesome experience to stand in those places!

As we retrace the footsteps of Jesus, we identify with the characters who were there in the original events. We can feel what it might have been like to be a disciple at the Last Supper. We feel the fatigue of grief as Jesus prays in the Garden. We know what Peter must have felt like to be accused of being a disciple and wanting to save his own skin. We identify with the story because it’s our story. It’s our life.

Years ago, there was a big Vietnam veterans’ parade in Chicago. Part of the commemoration was a mobile version of the Vietnam Wall, the memorial in Washington, D.C. Like the original, it bore the names of all the soldiers who had died in Vietnam. A TV reporter asked a vet why he had come all the way to Chicago to visit this memorial and

to participate in the parade. The soldier looked straight into the face of the reporter and with tears flowing down his face said, “Because of this man right here.” As the soldier talked, he was pointing to the name of a friend that was etched in the wall. He traced the letters of his friend's name. The soldier continued, “This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life for me.” As the news clip ended, the soldier let the tears flow as he stood there tracing the name of his friend with his finger.¹

We are retracing the story of Jesus today, because he gave his life for us. And we can relate to the characters in the drama.

We can identify with the **Crowd**. Many of them had undoubtedly followed Jesus from the house of Caiaphas. Some of them were Jewish leaders; others just came off the street. But they were all given a choice that day, and they chose Barabbas. Matthew says Barabbas' full name was Jesus Barabbas, which is not that unusual—Jesus was a popular name—but it is ironic. Jesus Barabbas' name means “Savior, Son of the Father.” Clearly this was a choice between messiahs. What kind of Messiah do you want? Whom will you trust to be your savior?

The idea of the Messiah had been around for a long time. Most people thought of the Messiah as a new king after the style of David. They wanted someone who would throw the Romans out of Israel and establish a new dynasty. When Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, they were thrilled, because that was a sign predicted by the prophet Zechariah of the coming of the Messiah.

But Jesus was a different kind of Messiah. Barabbas had already killed people trying to overthrow the Romans. His salvation was the way of violence, hatred, and political power. He would fit right into the Middle East today.

Jesus offered an alternative. His way was the way of love, even toward his enemies. His way was not to overthrow an oppressive power, but to be a citizen of another kingdom, which would exist long after the Romans left the land. The people had a choice, and they chose Barabbas.

We have had a similar choice in our recent history. During the Civil Rights struggle of the 1950's and '60's, there were two great leaders: Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both leaders wanted justice and equal rights for people of color. Both had many followers. Both ultimately gave their life for their beliefs. But their methodologies were totally different.² Malcolm X was a Muslim minister who believed that the injustice was so wrong and so severe that violence was sometimes justified in setting things right. His approach can be seen in his quote, “I am for violence if non-violence means we continue postponing a solution to the American Black man's problem just to avoid violence.”³

The other leader of the Civil Rights movement was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A Christian pastor, he was schooled in the teachings of Jesus and the political non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi (a Hindu). He believed that equality and justice would only come by changing people's hearts through encounters with non-violent resistance and sacrificial love. His strategy was to confront the systems of racism and materialism with “soul force” and to overcome injustice through redemptive suffering. The difference in the two approaches is the difference between the Watts riots in Los Angeles, which destroyed lives and property, and Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama—60 years ago this week—which brought about the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

We still have the choice the crowd faced that day in Pilate's Court. What kind of Messiah do we want? What kind of Savior will we serve? Will we put our trust in power

and violence and fear and hatred? Or will we believe in love and mercy and justice and compassion? Violence may win short-term success, but only love will win the ultimate victory.

But what if the crowd chooses the wrong way? Will we stand up for what is right, even if the rest of the crowd goes the other direction?

That's why we can relate to **Pontius Pilate**, the governor. Pilate was not an innocent dupe of the Sanhedrin. He was a ruthless politician. His job was not to keep peace, because peace was impossible. His job was to keep order, and he did it with an uneasy coalition with the Jewish leaders, fear and intimidation of the general public, and brutal suppression of any independence movements. His motivation was political expediency, expressed in the words of Mark, "*wishing to satisfy the crowd, he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus he handed him over to be crucified.*"⁴

Pilate was the governor, but he was not a leader. Leadership is based on a calling. Leadership has the courage to stand up for what is right; it has the passion to carry the mission to completion. Politics, on the other hand, is based on self-preservation and privilege; it tests the wind of public opinion before deciding a course of action; it will back down if the going gets rough. Pilate was a politician; Jesus was a leader.

Dr. King put it well: "Cowardice asks the question—is it safe? Expediency asks the question—is it politic? Vanity asks the question—is it popular? But conscience asks the question—is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right."⁵ Jesus did that; Pilate did not.

I think we can relate, can't we? How hard is it to stand against the wishes of the crowd? How hard is it to stay focused when everyone around you is going crazy? How hard is it to suffer for something you can't even touch or see?

Some of the Gospels have Pilate putting up more of a fight than Mark tells. But in the end, he still satisfies the crowd. There is other material in the Gospels that give us more of the story. In John there is more conversation between Jesus and Pilate—a very interesting dialog. In Luke, Pilate sends Jesus for an interview with Herod Antipas, the Galilean king, who happened to be in Jerusalem. In Matthew, Pilate's wife warns him that she had a bad dream about Jesus, and that he shouldn't have anything to do with the man.

Also in Matthew, we get the scene of Pilate washing his hands to signify that he was innocent of the blood of Jesus. Already he could tell that this was going to go badly. He wanted to remove himself from the consequences of his actions. No such luck. 2,000 years later, the world still remembers Pontius Pilate as the man who condemned the Son of God to die. History doesn't forget.

Maybe you can relate to that, too. Maybe there's something in your life that you wish you could escape, but it dogs your steps every day. Maybe there's a mistake in your past or a problem in your present, and you would like just to wash your hands and make it go away, but it won't. History doesn't forget, but God does forgive. Whatever you have done, you can find forgiveness. That's why Jesus died. That's the meaning of grace.

And that brings us to **Barabbas**, Jesus Barabbas, as Matthew tells us. A revolutionary, a murderer, perhaps today we would call him a terrorist. He was a big-time sinner. Most of us do not sin on as grand a scale as Barabbas. We're just ordinary little sinners. But even ordinary sin can cause a deep brokenness in our spirits.

As a pastor, I have seen every kind of human brokenness imaginable. It's often much deeper than it appears. I began to learn this when I was a teenager. When I was about 15, I had a friend who asked me to go with him to talk to our pastor. The guy was new to town and our youth group, but we had become friends, so I agreed to go. When we got behind closed doors with the pastor, my friend began to pour out his heart about a sexual assault he had endured from an older man in the town where he used to live. Let me make clear: my friend had done nothing wrong, but the guilt he felt was crushing his soul.

This was in small town Arkansas in 1972, and I was 15 years old. I'm sure my knuckles were white around the arms of the chair where I was sitting. I wanted to cover my ears and run away.

But the most amazing thing in that conversation was the grace of the pastor. As my friend wept in agony, the pastor offered words of comfort, love, forgiveness, and hope. I just remember thinking, how can he be so calm! But his grace in that situation allowed me to be gracious toward my friend, even to be touched that he trusted me to go into that conversation with him. That's when I began to understand the power and the privilege of being a pastor.

The late Pastor Tim Keller said, "Here's the gospel: you're more sinful than you ever dared believe; you're more loved than you ever dared hope."⁶ I think Barabbas saw the love of God that day. I think he understood that his debt was being paid by Jesus. Adam Hamilton says Barabbas was the "first sinner for whom Jesus died."⁷ Barabbas is such an interesting character; at least 10 movies have been made about him. In the most famous film, made in 1961, Barabbas takes a long, searching look into the face of his Savior. And his life is changed forever. Grace will do that.

One of the most popular young adult fiction series in the last decade has been *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins—best-selling books, blockbuster movies, gazillions of dollars.⁸ The novels take place in a dystopian, futuristic world, and the plot revolves around a horrible contest fought between 12 young people for the entertainment of the authoritarian government. The last child alive wins food and supplies for their home district for a year, thus avoiding the hunger. The young contestants, called tributes, are chosen by lottery. At the beginning of the story, a young girl named Primrose (or Prim) Everdeen is chosen to compete. As the authorities lead Primrose away, her older sister Katniss suddenly intervenes and shouts Prim's name. The guards stop Katniss from approaching Prim, but Katniss shouts, "No! I volunteer! I volunteer! I volunteer as tribute!" So Katniss becomes the tribute, and her sister Prim is saved.

Katniss Everdeen provides a moving example of courage and sacrificial love. She voluntarily takes the place of her sister. But we can understand that, right? It's her little sister. Most of us would like to think that we would do the same. We would suffer and even die to save a spouse, a child, a brother or sister, a parent, someone who is worthy of the sacrifice.⁹

But that's not how Jesus works. He is determined to die—so determined he doesn't even defend himself in front of the Sanhedrin or Pilate. He offers his life in sacrificial love as a substitute for the likes of Barabbas and Peter and Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate and you and me. As Paul said, "*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.*"¹⁰ Do you want to know why Jesus had to die? Look in the mirror.

All along our journey, we are surprised by grace. Even in the most difficult times of life, if we look closely, we can see God's footsteps beside us. As we retrace the steps of

Christ, we can see God working out God's purpose for Jesus, for the world, and for us—at the table, in the garden, in his betrayals, even as he is sentenced to die. We know, when we look at his life, and we look at our lives—that's the kind of Messiah we want. That's the kind of Savior we need.

¹ Lee Eclov, "Blasphemy!" *PreachingToday.com*.

² Adam Hamilton, *The 24 Hours That Changed The World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 73.

³ Malcom X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1964), 402.

⁴ Mark 15:15.

⁵ <http://www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/mlkquotes.htm>.

⁶ Tim Keller, "Treasure Versus Money," *PreachingToday.com*.

⁷ Hamilton, 43.

⁸ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008).

⁹ Gary Millar, "Jesus, Betrayed and Crucified," *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁰ Romans 5:8.