

Collisions: When Jesus Collides with Public Opinion

We've challenged ourselves (during these weeks leading up to Easter) to read at least one chapter each day in the gospel of John. I was reading this past week and I caught myself thinking about the mission of the church and about how that played out in what Jesus did.

What you find in the gospels (in those stories of Jesus' life) is a picture of how Jesus understood his mission. When Jesus came to this earth, that's what he was doing. He was on a mission. And what you find are not the things that (so often) come to mind when we think about the mission of the church.

If you said (to Jesus), "Hey, tell me about your mission trip to earth," he probably wouldn't tell you anything about church buildings or classes. He wouldn't say anything about how many people they had on a Sunday or how close they came to balancing their budget. He would probably tell you about some of the people.

"Let me tell you about this tax collector named Matthew. (It was unbelievable!) His life was going nowhere. I called him to be one of my followers. You should have seen the look on the other tax collectors faces when he dropped what he was doing and followed!"

Or, "Let me tell you about this woman who was caught in adultery. Everyone (who was there that day) was ready to stone her. And (yet) when I challenged them (to throw the first stone) if their lives were without sin, they all just dropped their stones and left."

Or, "You should have seen what happened this one day. This man who was lame, (unable to walk); his friends made this hole in the roof and dropped him down, so he could be healed. It was amazing when he picked up his mat and walked home."

As I was reading, I was reminded that the mission of the church should probably parallel (as closely as possible) the mission of Jesus. If what he did (in his life), while he was here, was built around his encounters with people, then the things we do in our life, (while we're here), should also be designed to give people the opportunity to come face-to-face with him.

Today we're in the third week of a series we're calling "Collisions." We're looking at a number of examples (in the gospels) of those face-to-face encounters, of what happens in a person's life when they collide with Jesus. Often times, you'll have this intersection that you never saw coming where your life collides with Jesus and it makes all the difference. We're looking at different examples of that.

The first two weeks we looked at collisions that happened early on in Jesus' ministry. These last two weeks, we'll be looking at examples that came near the end of his life.

In fact, maybe it struck you that on this weekend even before we remember the events of Palm Sunday we're reading this story about what happened on the Friday after, not long before Jesus was to go to the cross. Now, we're going to deal with Palm Sunday next week (on Palm Sunday), and we'll leave Good Friday for Good Friday. That's not what this is today. What this is today is a collision with one of the Good Friday characters, a man named Pontius Pilate.

Go ahead and turn in your Bibles, or look on your Bible app (if you have one), to Matthew chapter 27. I want to catch you up on what has happened in Jesus' life up until this point.

Jesus, at this point in his life, his life is about to come to an end. He's been abandoned by his closest friends. He's been arrested and beaten badly. On his face is this mixture of bruises and blood and spit. And now he's standing before this Roman ruler named Pilate for what would (end up being) his sixth and final trial.

A little bit of information about Pilate. Pilate was a Roman governor; not elected, but appointed. He was the governor over Judea, but he didn't like his assignment. He hated the Jews. He hated their beliefs. He had no time for them. And (in this particular case), he doesn't want to deal with Jesus.

Now, he doesn't understand what's going to happen to him in the next few moments. It's the most significant moment in his life. All he wants is to go back to bed. He just wants to be left alone. But he was awakened (early in the morning) and he has no choice. Something has to be done with Jesus.

Now, he's tried a number of maneuvers (to this point) to avoid him, but it's becoming obvious that's not going to happen. Here's the position he's in. He knows Jesus is innocent of the charges brought against him.

(He knows it.) It says he knew it was “out of envy” that they handed Jesus over to him. (He knew it.) Not only that, but his wife had a dream and she warned him to have nothing to do with this innocent man. Have nothing to do with him.

And so, here he is, he wants to release Jesus (because he knows he’s innocent), and yet it’s his job to deal with it, so he has to. He’s under pressure from the Roman government to keep the peace, so he can’t just ignore it. His job, his only job, was to keep the peace and (in whatever ways possible) keep (as many people) as possible happy.

So he tries a number of things. First, he sends Jesus to Herod. Jesus is from Galilee. He thought he could send Jesus to Herod. Herod was the ruler of Galilee. (This is Herod’s problem.) He thought it might work. It doesn’t work.

Herod sees Jesus as a sideshow. He wants to see some miracles. But Jesus doesn’t do miracles on demand. He asks Jesus questions and Jesus doesn’t respond, so Herod sends him back.

Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders are becoming more impatient, the mob is becoming angrier. So he tries something else. He says, “I’ll have him flogged.” That’ll be enough.

So the soldiers flog Jesus. They use a leather whip with metal balls and pieces of bone woven in. Jesus would have been beaten (literally) to the edge of his life. (That was the design of a flogging.) The flogging didn’t focus just on his back, but on his shoulders and his neck, all the way down his legs. A Roman flogging would often times, (in itself), kill a person, so they wouldn’t have to be crucified. (That’s the kind of beating Jesus took.)

So, now Jesus stands before the crowd. He’s beaten and bloodied (almost dead), and Pilate thinks, “Surely, this will be enough.” But it was not enough. They call for his life. Pilate still doesn’t want to do it. He does everything he can to avoid a collision with Jesus. He doesn’t want to make a decision.

And then he remembers that he has one card left and so he plays his final card. Verse 15, “Now it was the governor’s custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas.”

So, Pilate’s thinking, “How can I get out of this? How can I avoid Jesus?” He remembers he has this guy on death row. Matthew says, “He’s a notorious prisoner.” Mark refers to him as “a murderer and an insurrectionist.” John refers to him as a thief. You get the picture.

Pilate is thinking, “If I give them a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, surely they’re going to want me to let Jesus go. They’re not going to want Barabbas back on the streets.” This’ll do it.

Verse 17: “So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one of the two do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’” (Verse 20): “But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.” ‘Which of the two do you want me to release to you?’ asked the governor. ‘Barabbas’ they answered.”

Pilate has tried desperately to avoid this collision with Jesus, but he’s about to reach the point of impact. In (verse 22), he’s going to ask the most important question he’ll ever ask. He doesn’t know it. This is just another morning for him. He doesn’t realize the significance of it. But he’s going to ask a question. All of history will only remember Pilate based upon how he answers this one question.

Here’s the question. Verse 22, “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Christ?” (What should I do with Jesus?) He’s done his best to dismiss Jesus. Jesus will not be dismissed. He’s tried to avoid Jesus. Jesus will not be avoided.

For some of you, this question “What should I do with Jesus?” you’ve done your best to avoid it. What we don’t realize is that when we don’t ask it, we’re still answering it.

We do our best to (live life) and speed through the intersections without having to deal with this question. But the question cannot be avoided. Eventually, Jesus will collide (with your life) and you will have to decide.

For Pilate, Jesus collides with a few areas of his life, and it’s true for us as well. First, Jesus collides with public opinion. Pilate was a public figure and he was influenced by what others were saying. He knew Jesus was innocent, but he finally gives in. He bases his opinion (about Jesus) upon what everyone else was saying.

This will happen for you. For many of you, it already has. When Jesus collides with the latest poll, you will have to decide what you’re going to do with Jesus. When the Bible’s message is different from the one

your friends are sharing, what's culturally acceptable, you're going to have to decide what you're going to do with Jesus. It's going to happen.

There was a TV show on a few years back (I think it only lasted one season) called, "Would You Fall For That?" (Maybe you saw it?) It was a hidden camera show and would run social experiments to see if people would fall for whatever was happening. Most of the experiments fell under the category of tests of social conformity to see if people would conform to peer-pressure. Most of us think of ourselves as non-conformists, like we're not going to be influenced by others, but this show would go after that to see what would happen. One of the tests (in the show I saw) was called the elevator test.

The elevator test would go like this. The person, not knowing what was happening, would walk onto the elevator and the elevator was filled with people (all of them actors on the show) who, instead of facing the door (as you always do) were told to face the opposite direction, toward the back wall. When the unwilling (and unknowing) participant walked onto the elevator, he saw everyone facing (what he thought) was the wrong direction.

So, he did what you always do; pushed the button, and waited for the door to close. And then, started facing the one direction, (toward the door), but because everyone was facing the other direction (toward the back wall), thought maybe elevator etiquette had changed, (something had happened) so he slowly turned and faced the same direction, like everyone else. He started off facing the right way, but because everyone was facing the wrong way, he turned and did the same thing. That was the show; tests of social conformity.

Now, let me ask you a question. Do you think it would have played out (the same way) if someone had tipped him off before he walked onto the elevator? What if someone had told him what was going to happen? "Hey, in a moment you're going to walk onto this elevator and everyone will be facing the wrong way. And (when that happens), you're going to be questioning yourself, tempted to turn and face the same direction as everyone else. You're going to feel pressured to do it.

But when it happens, don't doubt yourself. Just because everyone else is doing it, you know what's right, so don't give in. No matter what everyone else is doing, you know what you should be doing. So don't let it get to you. Keep doing what you know is right. Do you think that would make a difference? (Sure it would.) It would make a significant difference.

That's what I want to say to every Middle School student going into High School; to every High School senior going off to college. "Hey, in a few moments, here's what's going to happen. (Don't be surprised.) You're going to walk onto a High School campus (college campus), be in a classroom, a dorm room, and everyone is going to be facing in a direction that's different from you."

"When that happens, don't doubt yourself. Don't question yourself. Don't give in to what everyone else is doing, just because everyone else is doing it. (Don't let it get to you); because we all have this tendency, when Jesus is colliding with popular opinion, to slowly turn around and face the other way."

That's the Christian life, (for all of us). Don't be surprised when you find yourself facing another direction. It's going to happen. If it's not happening, then something (even deeper) is wrong. Don't do it. It's not worth it.

And so, we have Pilate, on the one hand, colliding with what everyone else is saying, with public opinion. We also (second), find Jesus colliding with Pilate's personal relationships.

His wife sends him a message (verse 19) to leave Jesus alone. "Don't have anything to do with this man." Now, considering the culture of the day, I doubt this happened very often; that his wife got involved in his job. But she had this dream and so it happened. She tells her husband to avoid Jesus at all costs.

What you find (in the story) is that Jesus is doing what Jesus does. He's messing with Pilate's personal relationships. We found this last week, with the woman at the well. Jesus comes and tries to visit with this woman, to be honest about what was happening; she wants to talk about theology (and religion), but Jesus wants to talk about her.

Jesus collides with personal relationships. Some of you grew up thinking that you could keep these two separate. You could be a follower of Jesus, but it wouldn't affect your personal life; your work relationships, your family relationships, your romantic relationships. Jesus does not leave that as an option.

When Jesus collides with your life, he collides with every relationship you have. It'll happen at work. It'll probably happen among your friends (or your neighbors) or that person you've known all your life. It might even happen in your family.

If you're a follower of Jesus, there's going to be some tension in some of your relationships; especially in those places where your relationship with him wasn't there before. If it's (now there), it's going to change what happens.

Don't be surprised when it happens. You can hope it doesn't happen, but ultimately, it cannot be avoided. When you're following Jesus, eventually there's going to be a collision and you're going to have to decide (in that moment), "What am I going to do with Jesus?"

And then, third, Jesus collides with Pilate's professional aspirations. Pilate was a military man. He was given this assignment in this out-of-the-way post. Eventually, he could climb the ladder, grow in power. All he had to do was keep the peace, but it was off to a rough start.

And so, now, Jesus is threatening his career; his money, his power, his future. He doesn't want to deal with Jesus, but now he has to deal with Jesus.

We saw this in week one, with Nicodemus, a religious leader. Nicodemus had studied his whole life, a member of the Sanhedrin, and now he has to make a decision.

Many of you have shared those same stories with me. (Over the years, I've heard many stories.) A man who realized he can no longer change the numbers (at his work) and has to be straight up in what he reports. But he knows that when he does that, it'll become obvious that everyone else is not doing it, and it'll be tough.

A woman (in the adult industry) who understands that (as a follower of Jesus) she needs to change, but doesn't know what to do next. Maybe that seems obvious (as a follower) to stop doing that; but it's not so easy when you're that single mother and you just don't know how you'll keep putting food on the table.

A husband (father) recognizes that he's been traveling too much and needs to become a more active spiritual leader in his family, but (that demotion) will come at a cost. Jesus begins to interfere. C. S. Lewis calls him "The Great Interferer."

Pilate tries to avoid this collision with Jesus, but it's not happening. He tries to release Jesus (instead of Barabbas), but the religious leaders work the crowd to call for his release instead.

And so what does Pilate do? (Verse 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.'"

So he brings out this bowl of water and symbolically washes his hands of any responsibility of Jesus. (Verse 26), it says, "Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."

We don't really know what happened to Pilate after his collision with Jesus. His political career did not take off. We know that. It turned out badly. The fourth century historian, Eusebius, records that Pilate, under pressure from Rome, took his own life.

Another tradition, not so historically grounded, says that Pilate and his wife became believers. But because that didn't go well with Rome, he was (essentially) forced to take his own life or eventually executed. I don't know.

Here's what I know. There was this point in Pilate's life when he had to make a decision about Jesus. You've had some points like that in your life. I've had some in mine. (In some ways), they happen every day. And when they happen, you cannot avoid them. Jesus will not be avoided. You need to decide.

And so, here's the good news. Here's what you need to know when you decide. Jesus has already decided for you. He has already decided for you. He made that choice when he went to the cross. He made that decision when he chose to offer his life.

Now it's your turn. It's our turn. We're only a week away from Palm Sunday. Two weeks away from Easter. Jesus will not be dismissed, set aside. You can't avoid him. You need to decide... "What are you going to do with Jesus?"

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for sending your Son to become our Savior and for giving us the chance to live as his followers. We thank you for loving us so much, even in those times and places where we fail to love you.

We pray that you would help us, each day, in those moments when we need to decide what we're going to do with Jesus, to not be afraid to face in a direction different from the world, to not be influenced by what others around us might think, but to give all of our relationships, our entire life to him, no matter what the cost. In his name we pray. Amen.

