

The Pilate Principle:

“I wish I could, but I just can’t do the right thing until everyone agrees that it’s the right thing to do.”

By Merikay McLeod



Photo: Dover, Inc.

If you’ve ever struggled to be true to yourself, struggled to get others in your family, the office, the PTA, and the church to support integrity and have failed, you know what Pilate went through.

The Gospels present an engrossing collection of human beings. As in a Dickens tale, the cast of Gospel characters creates intriguing plots and counterplots. Although Jesus is the drama’s hero, it is the colorful ensemble of secondary characters that often demands our attention. Like us, they struggle with confusion, prejudice, selfishness, hope, pride, fear, grief, and all the other ordinary human characteristics. Our strengths, weaknesses, courage, and cowardice weave like chords of raw silk throughout the Gospels’ rich tapestry.

One of the most gripping characters in the story, the civil governor, Pilate, finds himself thrust into an uncomfortable public dilemma. Through the carefully detailed portrayal in *The Gospel According to Luke*, we see a man struggling to be a conscientious ruler. Pilate strives to be true to the requirements of his office and the inner imperative of moral integrity. Four times in only twenty-five brief verses, Pilate reasons, argues, almost begs the crowd to acknowledge the innocence of Jesus (Luke 23:1-25). In this struggle, Pilate displays more strength of character than he’s usually recognized for.

Beginning with the tension between Pilate’s desire to render honest judgment and his desire to maintain a friendly relationship with Jewish community leaders, Luke presents a common struggle. We experience it in our own conflicting desires: How can we do what’s right if it means offending those we need or admire? How many times have we held our silence, knowing we should speak? How often have we carefully chosen our words to create an impression quite different from our true feelings?

Our need for approval or acceptance can overpower our need to be truthful and just.

After the elders accuse Jesus of capital offenses, Pilate examines the Nazarene and renders an honest judgment: “I find no basis for an accusation against this man” (Luke 23:4).

But the priests and crowd ignore his words and demand punishment. Instead of arguing with them, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, the nominal ruler of Galilee. As a Galilean, Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction. Although intrigued by the Nazarene, Herod wants no part of the problem facing Pilate—that of protecting an innocent man against the bloodthirsty crowd bent on his execution—and sends Jesus back.

Three centers of human power jostle for position in this drama: Pilate, the governor of Judea; Herod, the ruler of Galilee; and the religious community leaders. They all believe they stand to gain if things work out the way they want.

If the priests can have Jesus executed, they can maintain control of the life and culture of their people. If Herod can make Pilate pass judgment, or if Pilate can make

Herod pass judgment, either one frees himself of a political hot potato.

Those who play power games, who love the adrenaline rush, often forget to factor in justice, integrity, and honesty when planning their strategies. It certainly appears that those involved in this power struggle considered little except winning what they wanted.

Jesus, the most powerful character in the drama, is an observer rather than an actor. As he has throughout the Gospels, he reveals a distinguishing characteristic of God by refusing to exercise power on his own behalf. He does not try to control or direct the action. He allows all involved to choose their own course freely.

Once Herod sends Jesus back, Pilate tries reason. "I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him," he tells the priests and their followers. "Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death" (Luke 23:14-15).

At this, the crowd becomes infuriated. Pilate endeavors to speak, to reason with them, but they shout him down. Clearly, Pilate wants to do what is right. He has rendered an honest judgment, but just as clearly he feels he must gain their approval of that judgment before he can enforce it if only he can convince them.

As Gospel readers, as observers from twenty-one centuries in Pilate's future, it's stirring for us to watch him argue and resist the dishonesty surrounding him. The crowd shouts, "Crucify, crucify him!" and again he speaks to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death" (Luke 23:21-22).

Pilate wants to let Jesus go. He has the power to do so. Yet his need for the crowd's approval complicates his good intentions. Why is their approval so vital?

Could it be for the same reason that the approval and acceptance of others is so vital to us? He, no doubt, thinks his job is at stake, or his *ability* to do his job. And maybe it is.

How often do we refuse to act justly because we think our employment is threatened? How often do we fail to do the right thing because we are afraid of losing our position or our next promotion or the regard of those we need or admire? The patient Christ waits for our decision.

If Pilate can only persuade the priests and their crowd—he works at it; he really tries.

Although it is often said that Pilate was a cowardly villain, Luke's Gospel shows him earnestly striving for

justice. We might write an anonymous letter to the church pastor or send a mild e-mail to the corporate vice president, but publicly take a stand for truth against a crowd of our employers or colleagues or peers? Not many of us have such emotional stamina.

Pilate struggles with the crowd, but he cannot persuade them. Because they will not relent, Pilate has to be brave or strong or authentic or honest all by himself. He has to act on principle rather than popular mandate. He, alone, must determine this innocent man's fate. He alone has the power to condemn Jesus or to set him free.

In this historic moment, Pilate is like the rest of us when we must decide between the demands of those around us and our own inner integrity. And like so many of us, Pilate gives in to the pressure of the crowd.

He is not as attentive to his conviction as he is to his fears. He is not as attentive to his conscience as he is to the clamor of the crowd. External pressure wins, just as it so often does in our own lives. Considering what we might suffer rather than what we must do to be moral adults, we follow Pilate's path.

Perhaps Pilate felt his position of power was more valuable than the life of an innocent person. Perhaps he rationalized that all these people were crazy anyway, so if they wanted to kill one of their own, why should he care? Whatever he decided to trade his integrity for—position, popularity, security—he first betrayed himself and his potential for greatness and then decided "that their demand should be granted. And he handed Jesus over as they wished" (Luke 23:24-25).

Matthew's Gospel says that Pilate performed a symbolic hand-washing to display his disagreement with the crowd's demands and to say that he would not accept responsibility for the death of Jesus. But it was his responsibility, and he was responsible, no matter who he wished to blame.

Blame is a very common choice in human life: we say our parents are to blame or our government or "society," when in fact the choice to be moral adults is always our own no matter what the external pressures. We are given many potential moments of greatness, which we so often trade for the feeling of security or popularity or approval.

Pilate stopped being true to himself when he gave more credence to the demands of the crowd than the demands of his own conscience. It was quite a struggle, much more of a battle than Judas seemed to wage. Yet in the end, Pilate was more attached to the approval of others than to his own well-founded judgment.

Merikay McLeod is a writer who lives in northern California. This article was first published in *Unity* magazine in July 1999.