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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Sunday of the Passion
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Lectionary Year B: Mark 15:1-47

Do you think Pilate had any regrets? Pilate, as we have just heard, was the Roman governor who, in one of history's most notorious examples of cowardice and capitulation, allowed Jesus to be handed over to the executioners and crucified. Perhaps Pilate never imagined that his name forever would cast a huge, dark shadow over the course of history. After all, most governors of even some of the world's best-known places fade into obscurity after their terms are completed. Can anyone, for example, name who was governor of Indiana from 1937 to 1941?

Anyone?

The answer is M. Clifford Townsend, whose length of service as governor was only four years because, well, that's what term limits held the governor to back then! Townsend is, perhaps, best known for his leadership during the Great Flood of 1937, which affected numerous Indiana communities along the Ohio River; thanks, in part, to Governor Townsend, Indiana recorded zero fatalities due to drowning throughout the crisis.

One would sooner be remembered for that than for allowing an innocent man to suffer and die -- am I right?

Conventional wisdom would tell us that had Pilate possessed even the slightest shred of humanity, he would've regretted what he

did -- or, more precisely, what he allowed to happen. Generally speaking, a lot of folks don't like government and politics because they think that those involved are just doing things that are expedient instead of right. Pilate would, at least on the surface, appear to be doing exactly that. Why bother with right and wrong when you'd rather not be bothered? Even today, politicians who seek to inform and to question are often seen as boring, wonkish, and teacherly -- to the point that these qualities cost them elections. I can't imagine that a more deliberative Pilate, who dared to challenge the will of the people, would've helped himself politically. Those above him in the Roman government would've wanted someone who governed efficiently and swiftly, while the citizenry below him would've wanted someone who gave them what they wanted.

This has led a lot of folks to conclude that, well...Pilate was just doing his job! I don't know how often one would want to use that as an excuse, though. Some might argue, too, that eventually the masses would've found someone to see to Jesus' execution had Pilate done differently. Regardless, I would hope that, were any of us to decide a human being's fate, we would consider whether or not our decision was moral.

But as history has shown us, some people simply aren't given to such reflection. The 1961 trial of Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem showed us a man who, when presented with what he had done, said he was just "following orders." Philosopher Hannah Arendt famously called her book on Eichmann's trial A Report on

the Banality of Evil, which very eloquently captured the denial of responsibility and matter-of-fact acceptance of extermination as permissible in the eyes of those doing the dirty work...permissible because someone else is telling you to do it! But, in the process, the evil that's being carried out becomes -- in the minds of the evildoers -- acceptable, trivial, banal.

Given the overall acceptability of brutality in the Roman Empire, Pilate's response to the masses probably wasn't that alarming. Any society that condoned the public slaughter of human beings in great arenas -- and regarded it as entertainment -- would have had no problem with a Pontius Pilate.

But we still tend to regard so-called functionaries like Pontius Pilate and Adolf Eichmann as immoral, subhuman, cowardly, and despicable. No one in his right mind would want a child to grow up to be just like one of these men! Moreover, no one in his right mind would want his legacy to be one of cowardice and capitulation. Into that corner go people who have failed not at careers or business or even marriage, but at being a human being. We're talking about the bottom of the barrel here!

One can't help but think, though, that at the end of their lives, such people are filled with regret. Maybe that's the comfort one takes in thinking that there's some glimmer of humanity in a Pontius Pilate. But in the case of Pilate and Jesus, Pilate -- even though he's a mere "functionary" -- is a pivotal figure in the history of salvation. Jesus said three times that he would undergo great suffering, be killed, and after three days rise again, so

someone had to seal the deal, right? One could speculate endlessly about whether Pilate knew more about who Jesus was than the Gospels tell us, but one then engages in the dubious enterprise of projecting things onto the story that weren't there.

But the story still has a bit of an ironic twist. Jesus ends up shedding his blood for all of the Pilates over the entire course of history. We don't know if Pilate himself, before the end of his life, experienced a conversion and believed in the One who was executed on his watch. We do know that while his example was bad, the end was (and remains) good. Yet of all the people in the Passion narrative, Pilate remains, perhaps, the biggest enigma. He wasn't completely bad, but he wasn't that good, either. He's not hell...he's certainly not heaven...he's probably purgatory. He leaves us in a limbo between a less-than-honorable legacy and an ambiguous reality. Were it not for the regular reminder we get in our Scriptures and creeds, he actually would've been just as forgotten as Indiana's governor from 1937 to 1941.

Holy Week is here, and we consider both the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and the realities that put him there. But note that Pilate's defect in character isn't the only one on display this week. There are the crowds whose cries of "Hosanna" turn to shouts of "Crucify him." There is the betrayal of Judas, who identifies Jesus to the high priests by way of a kiss. There are the men crucified next to Jesus, whose lives weren't exactly profiles in uprightness. But it is for all of these that Jesus died.

And who are we to think that we're any better than these? In

truth, we are no different from them. We are capitulating cowards like Pilate. We are the masses who cheer Jesus one minute and jeer him the next. We are the Judases who betray our Lord every time we lift up pious praises to him in word and then stab him in the back in deed. We are the criminals who have lied, stolen, murdered, and cheated so much that there's no punishment in the world to fit our crime.

And yet Jesus died for us...

Lest we consider ourselves backed into the sort of corner that Pilate made for himself, think of how this need not be the case for us. On this Holy Week (and always) we can go to the cross and see where Jesus died for our greatest defect -- sin. And through that cross, we receive the courage to live not as mere functionaries but as real agents of God's truth and justice. Why? Because by our Lord's example, we are not afraid of laying down our lives for what is right!

When I ask, "Do you think Pilate had any regrets?", we might answer, "Not if he found faith in the Lord Jesus." The forgiveness, life, and liberation he brings is sufficient to unburden anyone of a lifetime of regret. Even Pilate's cowardice and capitulation, while not forgettable, is surely forgivable. And here we are -- this Holy Week -- at the very place where forgiveness happens. Just as surely as God can find forgiveness for murderers, executioners, liars, thieves, cheaters, and lackluster politicians, God can find forgiveness for you.

Now may you find it.

Amen.