

March 11, 2018 -- “*Following Jesus to... Judgment: Who Judges Who?*” Rev Seth Jones

Scripture: John 18:28-40

*Question for Lenten Reflection: **Who am I judging? Who is judging me?***

Judgment swirls through and around our story today. Jesus stands in judgment in front of Pontius Pilate in the Roman headquarters, surrounded by centurions. He stands there because he has also been judged by the religious authorities of the day. At the end, he is judged by the crowd.

When I read this passage, I want to stand in judgment, from my perspective of centuries and interpretation and education. I want to judge the Jewish authorities for wanting to crucify Jesus. I want to judge Pilate for being wishy washy and turning Jesus over to the crowd. I want to judge the crowd for calling for the release of Barabbas rather than the release of Jesus.

I also know I am not the only one who wants to judge others in this story today. For many centuries, it was considered good theology to presume that, because the Gospel of John appears to be derogatory toward the Jewish faith and people, we should be as well. Purges, ghettos, crusades, and pogroms stand as an historical testament to a laissez-faire judgment against an entire group of people because great teachers said the Jewish people were responsible for killing Jesus.

If we can back everything up to John’s era, things aren’t as simple as that, though. John wrote this around 95-105AD. He was considered to be one of the last surviving disciples of Jesus, or at least that is what the tradition tells us. The date also tells us this is after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD. The destruction of the Temple led to a fracturing of the Jewish faith tradition into many different sects. One of those parts was the movement within the Jewish faith that centered on the one who led a group of increasingly influential followers who believed, based on their leader’s actions, teachings, and miracles, to be the Messiah.

This is the context of the followers of Jesus, and this is the way we need to read the Gospel of John – as the story of a radicalized Jewish sect who is trying to understand the same things the other Jewish people are trying to understand. Jesus was a Jew, and so were his followers. When John refers to “*The Jews*”, I think he means “*The people like us who are led by leaders who are entrenched in a particular way of thinking, and the people like us who are not followers of Jesus.*”

When we hear “the Jews” in the Gospel of John, and we hear all the judgment in those words in John’s Gospel, we need to understand a few things. First, we need to understand that we are the inheritors of almost 1600 years of teaching that is just flat out wrong about the Jewish faith. We bring the judgment of history to the text. Second, we need to understand our own need to judge all the people who participated in our Lord and Savior’s death. We bring the judgment of our own experience and desire to the text.

Judgment leads to discrimination, in part because we make decisions and we discern right from wrong by making judgments based on experience, teachers and tradition. We are programmed to judge; our minds and brains are specifically and specially designed to be exceptionally good at judgment. From simple considerations like: “*I like this; I don’t like that*”; “*This is right; and that is wrong*”, to very complex ideas, like: “*According to all that I know, this is closer to the truth than that; and that’s further from the truth*”.

The lens of Scripture sees judgment all over the place in the Bible, and it expands out to our history, our understandings, and our personal lives. And so that is the difficulty on the journey with Jesus to the Cross and then to the Resurrection: how do we see from a perspective that is not born of judgment, even though we are programmed to judge.

Each week we have been asking a question on our journey to the Cross, and our question is very simple this week:

*Who am I judging? Who is judging me?*

Our story today is all about Jesus being judged. But there are problems with the act of judging Jesus. This passage begins with a classic non-answer. Pilate goes out to the religious leaders who are handing Jesus over and says, *“What accusation do you bring against this man?”*

Rather than answer the question, the leaders answer with a question, saying, *“If he were not a criminal, would we have handed him over to you?”*

Pilate wants nothing to do with this and says, *“You take him and judge him according to your law.”*

To which the leaders say, *“We are not permitted to put anyone to death, but YOU are.”*

The judgment keeps getting passed off to the next person, and with each pass, Jesus' innocence becomes more apparent.

Its key that John wrote the Gospel of John a generation after the destruction of the Temple, because a few verses later in v 37, Pilate says *“you are a king?”*

Pilate knows this is a thing the Jewish people are looking for – a king like David to lead them to freedom from Roman oppression.

And so Pilate questions Jesus.

Pilate asks Jesus, *“Are you the King of the Jews?”*

Jesus answers the question with a question: *“Is this your idea or did others tell you about me?”*

To which Pilate also asks a question, *“I am not a Jew, am I? What have you done?”*

Jesus says *“For this I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”*

Here, Jesus is paraphrasing one of the most cherished stories in the Jewish tradition, the story of Esther. Esther is another story of judgment. In this story, the Jewish people have been judged by evil Haman as marked for death. Esther, who has been chosen queen of King Achashverosh, is the one who realizes what is happening. She risks her life to bring the truth to the king. In her struggle to come forward, which would also mean certain death for countering a mandate from the king, she goes to her Rabbi, who has raised her from a very little girl. Rabbi Mordecai tells Esther, *“Who knows? Perhaps you have been born for such a time as this”* (Est 4:14).

Esther tells the king what Haman is doing and the king is horrified that he has been double-crossed by his advisor and rescinds the death sentence upon the Jews. This is why Esther is celebrated as a savior of the Jewish people. In saying, *“For this I was born and this is the truth I speak”*, Jesus is aligning himself with Esther, who saved the Jewish people by bringing the Truth to the King Achashverosh.

And then, Pilate asks *“What is truth?”*

Pilate goes out to the crowds and says *“I find no case against him”*

The judgment against Jesus is found to be unfounded and untrue by the judge of Jesus.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, *“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make, you will also be judged, and the measure you make will be the measure you get”* (Matt 7:1-2).

The statement is unconditional. There is no qualification for that, it’s simply judge not lest ye be judged.

This may be the most difficult passage in Scripture to deal with. I am a judgmental person, and the more I try to live into Jesus’ teaching here, the more places I see where I am standing in judgment. The key to *“Judge not lest ye be judged”* is first knowing - recognizing - that we judge.

We are called to justice and righteousness. We are called to stand against oppression. We can’t determine what is just and what is right without first judging what is wrong. It may be that standing against oppression means judging a person wrong for enacting and participating in the oppression. Our story today makes Jesus’ teaching even more difficult, because it is this story of judgment – the judgment of religious leaders, of imperial courts, of crowds – which takes us to the Cross.

Pilate says to the crowd, *“You have a custom to release someone for the Passover, do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?”*

The crowd does not want Jesus released, but they want Barabbas released. The word in Scripture used to describe Barabbas is better translated as *terrorist* or *murderous pirate*. ‘Bandit’ is mundane and not accurate. Regardless, the one who is innocent – Jesus - becomes a substitute for the one who was judged guilty -Barabbas. Jesus takes on the judgment of the one who stands guilty, even though Jesus is innocent.

There is no release from wrestling with judgment in our story today.

There are the judgments within this story.

There are the judgments from deep in Scripture which are referenced in this story.

There are the judgments from history based on the misreading and misinterpretation of this Gospel.

We are surrounded by judgment here. And yet, we are taught to **not** judge. The shift of mind and soul that’s required to follow Jesus and Jesus’ teaching is enormous. We put the judgment of others off onto Jesus and God, saying we will be judged at some future point by them,

hoping that others suffer for the judgments they have made against us, rather than us for the judgments we have made against others.

But here is the thing about Jesus' judgment and God's. John tells us in his first letter very simply that "*God is love*" (1 Jn 4:16). If this is true, any judgment that comes from God and Christ for us can **only be** grace and love. This is not judgment in the human way of thinking.

In Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus in Chapter 3, he tells us what judgment looks like from a God perspective. After Jesus says the verse we have all memorized, "*Jesus so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life*" (Jn 3:16), Jesus says this verse, which we also should memorize: "*Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather that the world might be saved through him*" (Jn 3:17).

Jesus even suggests this to Pilate. He says, "*My kingdom is not of this earth. If it were, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But my kingdom is not from here.*"

The way Jesus' kingdom deals with judgment, with other people, is through love and grace, not punishment and death. So many expressions of Christian faith take great pride in the ability to judge others and judge the behavior of others.

And so here is my take-away from our reading today:

If our judgments, our ways of following Jesus, do not reflect Jesus' grace and God's steadfast love, then we're not trying hard enough.

We're not trying hard enough to find loving and graceful ways to change the world.

We're not trying hard enough to become the grace and love we have been shown by what we have been given through Jesus Christ.

We're not trying hard enough to become the people God wishes us to be.

We are on a journey to the Cross. Last week, we spoke of the eternal worldview that Peter was lacking, the eternal "*I Am*" of Jesus. The Cross is the singularity, the historic and cosmic focal point, where the judgments of humankind meet the Eternal judgment of God and Christ, where God's grace and love for all Creation meets humankind's desperate need to judge according to difference, partiality, and self-justification. Both judgments are present at the Cross.

And there, in that moment as we stand with the beloved disciple, we will be faced with an existential choice, a life-determining and life-changing judgment we all will need to make. Which judgment will you choose? The judgment that leads back to human kingdoms, or the judgment that leads into God's love, grace and Resurrection?

Amen.