



“Religion and Politics”

Texts: Philippians 2:5-11
and Mark 14:53-65, 15:1-20

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

When we were learning the ropes of social etiquette and propriety, we were taught that there were two subjects that should not be discussed by proper ladies and gentlemen: religion and politics. Nowadays, that instruction seems to have been cast aside, as all anyone seems to talk about is religion and politics. It is a potent force – individually or addressed in combination – so powerful that it can destroy friendships and unhinge families, and – horror of horrors – can get you “unfriended” on Facebook. But, today, as we consider the death of Jesus Christ, we are compelled to talk about religion and politics, because they played no small part in the events of Holy Week that culminated in the crucifixion of Jesus.

The question on which our sermon centers is simply this: “Who Killed Jesus?” I want to acknowledge from the outset the invaluable contribution made to this question by John Dominic Crossan. In his book, *Who Killed Jesus?*, Crossan is not beholden to ancient forms and constructs that no longer provide adequate answers to that central question. It is no longer enough to say that “Jesus was born to die,” because that opens up a can of theological worms, the wiggliest of which is found in the question: what kind of God sends someone innocent to die for the guilty? Crossan asks us to look deeper and then to turn on our brains.

Let’s begin with a consideration of our passage from Mark’s gospel. Two scenes are described with remarkable parallels. The first scene is a trial before the religious authorities and ends with the temple guard beating Jesus. The second scene is a trial before the political authority, in the person of Pontius Pilate, and ends with the soldiers of the empire beating and spitting on Jesus. Remember, please, that Mark’s was the first of the synoptic gospels written and Matthew and Luke use Mark’s work as a skeleton for their own gospels. So, from the earliest tradition, the role of religion and politics is well established in the death of Jesus.

Why would these two opposing camps turn to each other in a spirit of cooperation rarely seen? The simplest answer is that Jesus challenged both and offended both. Jesus was perceived as a threat by the religious authorities and the civil authorities.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus confronted the religious authorities of his day. He famously called them names: “brood of vipers,” “white washed sepulchers,” and “hypocrites.” Following his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, an entry that was to be reserved for the Messiah, Jesus went to the Temple, upset the tables of the money changers, for all intent and purpose, shutting down the Temple for a day during a time when the Temple was being heavily used and visited in preparation for the Passover.

And that got the attention of the civil authorities. If the principle message of Jesus’ ministry was “the kingdom of God,” it was a kingdom diametrically opposed to the Empire of Caesar. Jesus’ focus on injustice under the empire, poverty under the empire, corruption under the empire, did not endear him to the empire. Now, he was being welcomed as a king – a direct challenge to the empire and its authority – and a challenge that never went unmet.

Mark’s gospel sets the stage for the confrontation. Here they were: two powerful institutions that rarely worked together, but who, in the matter of Jesus of Nazareth, found common ground. The religious authority had no power to inflict capital punishment. The civil authority exercised that power with abandon – sometime crucifying as many as 200 people in a day.

So it is that our *Brief Statement of Faith* sums it up with just a few words:

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
“Who killed Jesus?” Religion and politics.

But then, the question must be asked: “Why didn’t Jesus just stop? Why didn’t Jesus just avoid being confrontational? Why didn’t Jesus simply preach little feel-good sermons that offended no one and made everyone feel warm and happy?” Why didn’t Jesus just nod and smile, while the religious authorities turned God into a profit-making business? Why didn’t Jesus simply bow to the authority of the government and preach a little, “Well, when we all get to heaven our troubles will be over?”

The simple answer is that it would not have been faithful to God. Whatever Jesus was, he never strayed from obedience to God. He would not soften his critique of the religious authorities of his time. He would not back down from addressing the abuses and corruption of the civil authorities.

In the Letter to the Philippians, we find what well might have been the text of an early Christian hymn. In the passage, that we heard again this morning, are these words:

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death
- even death on a cross.

What led Jesus to the cross? His unshakeable obedience to God and the vision that God had - and has - for this world. In his book, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, J. Denny Weaver, writes:

In carrying out his mission, Jesus was ready to die and he was willing to die. It was not a death, however, that was required as a compensatory retribution for the sins of his enemies, and his friends. It was a death that resulted from the fulfillment of his mission about the reign of God.¹

Jesus could not - and did not - seek to avoid the cross, because to do so would be to abandon the first principle of his life: obedience to God who commissioned him to his ministry and mission.

Now, it would be nice if we could just leave it there. Sadly, we can't.

In the same passage from Philippians that speaks of Jesus' obedience, we read these words:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death
- even death on a cross.

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

The hallmark of that life was obedience, deference, submission, acquiescence to the will and purpose of God. That is to be the hallmark of our lives as well. When other powers demand our obedience, and their way flies in the face of God's way, we are to stand for God and remain obedient to the calling of our baptism to be God's people. When those who claim the name of Jesus Christ, but follow those whose words and actions oppose Christ, they are not being obedient to God. When Christian people claim that their trust is in God, but stand with those who stand against the poor, those who despoil the earth, those who deny protection to the vulnerable, they are not being obedient to the calling of God in Jesus Christ. And if obedience to God's will and way means that we lose friends, lose power and authority, or suffer loss of any kind, the cross reminds us that we will probably never be called upon to lose our lives as Christ's obedience cost him his life.

Martin Luther King, Jr., no stranger to standing against those who advocated a way opposed to God's way, and remaining obedient to his calling as a Child of God, reminded us:

If a man has not discovered something he will die for,
he is not fit to live.

May I suggest, that the way of God – made known in Jesus Christ – and faithfully living that way of life, is something worth dying for.

“Who Killed Jesus?” The very powers and authorities to whom Jesus would not yield. “Who Killed Jesus?” Those who would have assumed the place of God. “Who Killed Jesus?” Those who believed their power and authority should not be questioned.

And the second question is this: “Why did Jesus die?” Jesus died because he would not compromise on his mission of calling the world back to God. Jesus died because he would not bow his knee to the powers and authorities of his day. Jesus died because, as it has always been – we believe that the best way to silence the message is to silence the messenger.

But...God had the final word. More about that next week.

For now...

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death
– even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

For now and evermore. Amen.