

TRUE GREATNESS

2 SAMUEL 23:1-7; JOHN 18:33-38

CHRIST THE KING/NEW MEMBERS/DEDICATION OF PLEDGES – 11/23/03

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Today's scene from Jesus' arrest and trial is familiar. But I would like to rewind the tape to review something that, if you are like me, you might have missed even though we have watched this episode many times before. I call our attention to a small but fascinating detail that tells much about today's story.

Before Jesus is taken to Pilate's headquarters for questioning John tells us that the temple leaders "did not enter the headquarters of Pilate so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover."

Interesting. These fine, upstanding religious leaders do not want to do anything that would compromise their purity. They want to look good, feel good and keep up appearances.

Never mind that they are in the process of framing and executing an innocent man. These leaders of the community see nothing incompatible with their concern to maintain ritual cleanliness while getting the blood of Jesus on their hands.

They say the devil is in the details. You can almost see the pointed, reptilian tails poking out from beneath their robes. They stand for the dark side of religious leaders of every faith tradition.

This marvelous little detail gives us a glimpse into the striking contrast between Jesus' authority on the one hand and the flawed authority of the religious and state leaders of his time on the other hand.

But I call our attention to this little detail today not only because it tells us so much about what is going on in the story but also for what it tells us about human nature, about you and me – and about the truth and integrity Jesus embodied and calls us to live out.

As we dedicate pledges for 2004 and welcome new members these stories from the Bible are like mirrors that give us an opportunity to look at ourselves.

I would like to challenge us to consider what kind of church we are.

How do we perceive ourselves? How do we want to be perceived?

The problem is it is easy to see ourselves only as others see us. The clothes we wear. The homes we live in. The stores we shop. It is easy to deceive ourselves and think that these external qualities define who we are – like those faithful temple leaders escorting Jesus.

This past week we had some work done on our car. The dealer gave me a loaner – a BMW. Not a little BMW either. It was a big BMW. Yesss! I said to myself secretly. Can't wait to drive this baby. After buckling myself into the seat I started debating which way to take back to the office. Should I call Carol, go for a spin, show her a real car. I noticed as I drove down the street heads turning. Pretty cool I thought to myself.

I could almost hear God getting annoyed. That loaner was a little payback for the patience he demonstrated to that nasty toll collector last week.

That'll be the last time we try something like this.

How much easier it is to see ourselves from the outside in rather than the inside out which is how God sees us.

That is, the motives we have. The decisions we make when no one needs to be consulted. The actions we take when no one is looking.

By revealing the pre-occupation of the temple leaders with the dietary code as they put Jesus to death John shows us a bigger problem – the moral bankruptcy of the entire system. It reminds me of the time I noticed a little blemish on one of the boards on our boat up in New Hampshire. When I pressed on it my entire finger went through the wood. Dry rot. There's a lot of dry rot going on among these leaders dealing with Jesus.

When Caiaphas and Pilate attempt to lay traps for Jesus as they interrogate him the traps they set for Jesus end up becoming traps for themselves.

I remember a business executive in a church I served. He told me about one of the most unpleasant experiences he ever had. Someone in one of the company's offices was suspected of fraud. So this man, with another person, undertook the task of interrogating the suspect. "I just felt dirty after the whole thing was over," he said. "It was a horrible experience."

That's what is going on when Caiaphas and Pilate grill Jesus. Only in their case they know the suspect is innocent. It's dirty business. Their souls are filled with corruption. But they do not violate the dietary code.

"I have nothing to hide," Jesus says to Caiaphas. "I teach openly in the synagogue and temple. Ask anyone who has heard me." Or to Pilate who asks if Jesus claims to be a king. "You say so. For this I came into the world – to testify to the truth."

John rivets our attention in today's story on the question of the authority of the leaders versus the authority of Jesus. Not constitutional or economic or military authority. Moral authority. Jesus has it, the others don't.

The thing about moral authority is you know it when you see it. Rabbi Kushner was here this past week. I had the opportunity to have dinner with him the night before his talk. Listening to him the next day I had the sense that here was a man whose words and actions were nearly perfectly aligned. Abraham Lincoln lead with moral authority. Listen to his sorrow at Gettysburg. To his despair in the Second Inaugural Address even after being re-elected and having won the war.

The question today is can we live up to the true greatness, the moral authority Jesus embodied and calls us to exhibit? We live in a time that cries out for such leadership.

Think of our present leaders. In the White House and some of his advisors. The Democratic candidates for president. We could list corporate or non-profit or church leaders who have been in the news. Entertainment celebrities have recently been in the headlines. The point is you recognize moral integrity and leadership when you see it.

This is an important question to mull over on a day when we dedicate precious human and material resources for the year ahead.

The story from II Samuel tells about King David at the end of his life.

David says this, “one who rules justly, in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from rain in the grassy land.”

A colleague of mine remembers singing those words in Randall Thompson’s “Last Words of David” when he was in high school. He wondered then what a king who rules justly has to do with morning light, with the sun rising on a grassy lawn gleaming from rain.

Maybe you’ve had the experience I have many mornings. Each day before dawn – which isn’t hard at this time of year – I go to a small room on the third floor of our house.

There I sit at a simple table by a window that overlooks Norwood Avenue below. The house is quiet. My mind is fresh. It is amazing how a good night’s sleep refreshes your body, mind and soul.

In those first hours of the day as the morning light hits the rooftops and treetops on the street below I write in my personal journal, read something spiritually challenging, and say morning prayers. Most days I am able to look ahead into the week or month and face challenges from the inside out. Asking myself what is important. What’s the priority here? What is God calling me to do, calling Westminster to be and do?

I’d like to suggest that’s where we are today. Looking out over the year ahead. Today is an opportunity to reconsider and recommit to what it is that calls us to this place, among these people, in this community.

How deep is that call? How broad is our vision? Do we perceive ourselves from the outside in or the inside out as individuals and as a congregation?

This is a critical moment in the life of our church. Jesus preached and taught and healed openly among the people. He was confident that his commitment to the truth would speak for itself. And it did. The crowds that came to hear him multiplied and hungered for more.

We have made some major strides as a congregation. We just changed the Sunday morning schedule this fall. We’ve made good progress with our stewardship – yet we have a way to go. Nevertheless, I have the feeling that somehow we have gotten a little too comfortable with what happens here.

What I hold before us today is this choice: comfortable religion that we can control and manage by following established rules and expectations – like those temple faithful who remained outside Pilate’s offices fearful of ritual defilement.

Or a ministry that transforms each of us and the culture of this entire congregation. A ministry that grows out of our conviction that God isn’t finished with any of us yet. That God wants to use us to transform this city and to bring healing to some corner of our broken world. A ministry that challenges each of us in our personal discipleship and spiritual journey.

When Jesus met with Pilate, that’s the kind of ministry that put him on trial. In the end it’s the only ministry worth living for. Or dying for too. Let’s go for it! Amen.