

## “Under Pressure”

Mark 15:1-15

[63] Good morning, friends. Would you do me a favor? Turn to someone near you and tell them, “You are in the right place this morning.” It is important to remind ourselves why we are here: to worship God and to make disciples of Jesus Christ. In this place, we can draw strength from others who have decided to follow Jesus. It’s not that any of us is perfect. Instead, we have discovered we need each other to be God’s church. So let me affirm, you made a good choice to worship with us today.

I invite you to pray with me, with your palms open, ready to receive what God has for you.

Lord Jesus Christ, by whom all things were created, we need you this morning. We are your people, gathered in your name to praise you and worship you, and we desire to hear your voice. Allow your truth to be preached. Show us that our choices matter. Teach us again how much you love us. And we will give you all the honor, glory and praise, Lord Jesus. Amen.

[64] I’d like to start off with a question. Who is your role model? Put another way, if you had a big decision to make, whom would you trust to help you? *[Wait for answers.]* We look up to a lot of people: parents, teachers, coaches, maybe world leaders and even pastors whom we respect.

One thing I have learned is that the more prominent position you hold, the greater the pressure you face. Just knowing that 80 YouTube subscribers are watching me right now raises my anxiety a bit. God bless all of you who listen to my messages! The truth is, whether or not we view ourselves as leaders, our words and our choices carry great weight, for good and for ill. The crowds around us, big and small, test our integrity and wisdom. And we learn quickly, it is impossible to please people all the time.

[65] Today is Palm Sunday. Today we remember the crowd who cheered for Jesus, waving palm branches as he entered Jerusalem. They shouted, “Hosanna! God save us!” The people were looking for a messiah. They were expecting Jesus to save them from their Roman oppressors.

[66] Today is also known as Passion Sunday. We know that during the Passion Week, the crowd changed their mind. They became emotionally charged, and by Friday, they were calling for Christ’s death. Their demands, and the leaders’ reaction to them, changed the course of history. By reflecting on this story, we can learn a lot about ourselves and the decisions we make under pressure.

[67] I want to specifically focus on Pilate, Barabbas, and Jesus. First, consider Pilate, the governor of Judea and a Roman general known for his cruelty. How would you have liked to be in his shoes? Pilate wanted nothing to do with the crowds or their religion. It was only because of a legal technicality that he faced the crowd. The chief priests brought Jesus to Pilate because only the Romans could enforce the death penalty.

[68] During that early Friday morning 2000 years ago, a lot of things happened quickly. Jesus was convicted by the Jewish leaders in the middle of the night at a secret, illegal trial. They bound him hand and foot and dragged him before Pilate at the Antonia Fortress, the Roman barracks adjacent to the Jewish temple. Imagine how this location affected the Jewish people; an army right next door to the center of their worship. It was a powerful symbol of the animosity between them.

[69] Try to visualize what Pilate saw and heard. Shouting. Soldiers. Mobs. Jealous priests. Angry people out for blood. A frenzied crowd awaiting Pilate’s order. Have you ever felt pressure, even from just one person, who demanded that you give in? Have you ever felt tempted to compromise your beliefs? If so, you can glimpse the dilemma that Pilate faced.

Pilate saw through the Jewish leaders’ plot. He knew Jesus was innocent. Yet Pilate was in a difficult position. He had to stay in control. He was already on thin ice with the emperor. This was not a good time to show weakness.

[70] Sometimes when we are faced with difficult decisions, we try to “pass the buck.” Pilate thought he had a way out. He had a custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover – a token to appease the masses. He thought he could free Jesus by offering the crowd a choice. Pilate pulled out a murderer from prison: a man named Barabbas, a convicted criminal who had fought against Rome. Pilate expected that the people would condemn Barabbas and let Jesus go free.

However, the scene did not play out as Pilate had hoped. The crowd poured their hatred and disappointment into Jesus. “Crucify him!” they shouted. Now, there were others in Jerusalem who did not want Jesus to die. But either they were afraid to speak up, or they weren’t there. Either way, Pilate had to deal with the crowd who was before him then.

[71] Mark 15:15 records Pilate’s compromise: “Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.” Even though Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, Pilate still gave in to the demands of the crowd. We might judge Pilate harshly, yet if we are honest, we know that we also face the same temptation to give in to the crowd.

[72] I want to shift our focus away from Pilate for a moment over to Barabbas. He was a convicted criminal. Barabbas admitted he was guilty. As he stood before Pilate and the crowd, what did he think? On the one hand, he fought for what he believed in. His methods were cruel, but they were popular. The crowd was desperate for freedom, so perhaps they looked the other way as rebels like Barabbas resorted to murder and insurrection, even discreetly supporting them.

Barabbas represents all those who choose violence over peace, the sword over negotiation. Barabbas represents those who say, “My way or the highway!” “Might makes right!” and “The ends justify the means.” Our world today is filled with those who choose violence to get their way.

I think we’ve all felt like Barabbas from time to time. Our frustrations run high. We lash out, maybe not with literal swords, but with words that cut, wound, and scar. In our current pandemic, we see, far too often, the tragic results when anger boils over.

I want to tell you today, it doesn’t have to be this way. Violence and compromise don’t have to win. Not if we turn to the third way, the way of Christ.

[73] Consider how Jesus reacted to both of these other men. When Jesus stood before Pilate, accused of treason, he made no attempt to defend himself. Jesus stood silent before Pilate. By Roman law, if an accused person refused to speak, they were automatically guilty. Pilate even admitted he had the power to free Jesus. [74] Mark 15:5 records, “But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.”

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, Isaiah recorded these words:

[75] “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7)

[76] That is exactly what happened on this day in Jerusalem. Jesus didn’t defend himself because he was determined to carry out God’s plan. Jesus knew his death would save the world, although not the way the crowd wanted or expected. Pilate may have compromised, but Jesus never did.

[77] What about Barabbas? As he stood next to Jesus, did he expect to be set free? Was he shocked by Jesus’ silence, too? Barabbas was given his freedom; Jesus took Barabbas’ place. Jesus, an innocent man, took the punishment that Barabbas deserved. The guilty man was set free. Surely that would have surprised, even shocked him. We can only imagine what Barabbas did afterward.

Some of the people in the crowd probably thought that Barabbas was their savior. He fought for them. However, Jesus came to be a different type of Savior. He came, not with military power, but with spiritual power. He was a suffering servant who would save his people from their sins. The crowd, Pilate, and Barabbas simply did not understand.

[78] Jesus’ execution was ordered because of a broken system, unchecked jealousy, and the anger of the crowd. Pilate chose to compromise, to go with the crowd, not to lead with integrity. Barabbas chose violence, and only by the grace of God was he allowed to go free.

[79] Honestly, I can understand the desire of the crowd. They wanted to be free of Roman oppression. Jesus, on the other hand, was telling the people to love their enemies, to carry the backpacks of the Roman soldiers an extra mile, to turn the cheek when they were insulted and abused, to fight hatred with love. Jesus in effect said, “Not by the power of the sword, but by the power of the cross.” Jesus would change the world by his sacrificial love.

[80] When you face pressure and difficult decisions, what is your guiding principle? If you seek comfort, you will likely compromise. If you seek quick

results, you may resort to unethical methods. Yet, if you seek integrity, the way of Jesus, you will make a decision that pleases God.

[81] One of the greatest reasons to gather together in church is to be in a crowd that wants the best for you. We draw strength when we worship together. Instead of being surrounded by people bent against God’s will, we are surrounded by those who want to follow Jesus. Instead of being pressured to submit and compromise, we can admit our weakness to each other, forgiving each other, and holding each other accountable for our decisions.

[82] Jesus died to save the world. He died for Pilate. He died for Barabbas. He died for you and me. Jesus died for every sin we ever committed, including every time we have gone along with the crowd. There is not one righteous person among us. We have all forsaken Jesus and ignored what he stood for. And yet, by the grace of God and the love of Christ, we have forgiveness.

[83] I want to speak to these young ladies who are making a significant decision today, to publicly confess their desire to follow Jesus wherever he leads them. That might even lead you into full-time ministry, in some form. Following Jesus means we will be faced with some difficult decisions, choices to listen to the crowd or to listen to God’s voice.

Confirmation is not about conforming. You have each walked a different path that led you to salvation in Christ. We are gathered today to affirm and celebrate your decision. In welcoming you into full professing membership of Grace United Methodist Church, we also have the opportunity to renew the commitments we all have made to God and each other. Your confirmation is in fact a gift to all of us.

I pray that you will not give into the pressure of the crowd. I pray you will not define yourself by other people say. I pray you will hear the truth God’s word tell us. You are beloved. You are free. You are children of God Almighty. You are worthy of love, for Jesus Christ died to save you. You are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for you to do. (ref. Eph. 2:10)

As your future unfolds, I hope that you will remember the story of Jesus, Pilate, and Barabbas, and let the truth of God convict your heart. Our choices do matter. May we all have the strength to choose the way of Christ.

Let us pray.

Memory verse

Hebrews 12:2 - Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Reflection questions

1. When have I been a part of the crowd?
2. When have I refused to speak up for the innocent at my own risk?
3. When have I chosen “might” over “right”? Violence over peace?  
Harshness over gentleness?
4. When have I failed to recognize the God’s truth in my life?
5. In light of what Jesus went through, what am I willing to do about any of those answers?