

Otherworldly Christians

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“My kingdom is not of this world. . . .” – John 18.36a

I love my cooking shows – many of you know that – and one of my favorites is hosted by Lidia Bastianich. Lidia shows you how to cook Italian food – and who doesn't like Italian food? Lidia sometimes has Grandma – her mother – on her show for cameo appearances, and Grandma often shares some of the wisdom that she learned from her elders in her childhood home in Italy. One of those wise sayings from Grandma is that an egg today is better than a chicken tomorrow. It's a little enigmatic, but what it means is that you're better off if you have an egg today than if you're hoping for a chicken tomorrow. Or what you've got in front of you is better than what you're thinking you might get. Or even take advantage of what you've got rather than wait and see if something better comes along. That sort of thing. The saying is about the advantage of the actual over the theoretical. It's practical wisdom for practical people, and most of us are nothing if not practical.

And so was Pontius Pilate, who appears in today's gospel reading. Pilate was a practical man. He had to be, since he was the guy in charge of Judaea, one of the more troublesome provinces of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus. He assumed office in the year 26 and was recalled to Rome ten years later because he mishandled an uprising by a group of Samaritans. He was told by his superiors that he'd been unnecessarily harsh. He thought he was just doing his job.

It wasn't the first time Pilate had had to deal with an uprising among the Jewish people. Just a few years before the Samaritan insurrection, Pilate had been forced to preside over the civil trial of Jesus, which is where our gospel reading this morning is taken from. It was Jesus' second trial in as many days, because he'd already been tried by the Jewish religious court, the Sanhedrin, and they'd found him guilty of blasphemy.

Apparently, he'd gone around telling the Jewish people that their religious elders were wrong and that he was right, and that he and God were one, and that he was greater than Moses, and all sorts of other things observant Jews wouldn't think or say. He'd also done some things that were contrary to the religious laws, as well, like eating with Gentiles, who were ritually unclean, thereby deliberately making himself ritually unclean, as well.

The list was fairly extensive, but it could all be grouped under the heading “blasphemy” – not showing God the proper respect – and blasphemy was a capital crime among the Jews. But the problem was, the Jewish people ordinarily couldn't execute people on their own; they had to refer such cases to the civil authorities, which is why Pilate found himself in the middle of a dispute he neither wanted nor fully understood.

He tried to get out of it. He agreed to interrogate Jesus on his own, when an aide told him that the trial was headed his way, hoping that a public flogging and humiliation would satisfy Jesus' accusers. For a non-Jew like Pilate, religious disputes among the Jews were always tedious, messy, no-good-

comes-out-of-this affairs.

So Pilate does his job. His first question to Jesus, according to the record John left for his followers, was whether Jesus was the king of the Jews. Pilate wasn't particularly interested in the blasphemy question because what Jews thought about showing proper respect to their God was their business, not his. His business was making sure that disloyalty to the emperor was quashed quickly and effectively and that the peace of the province was maintained as much as possible. And if Jesus were setting himself up as some sort of king – when there was already a client king for the Jews, Herod – that was a sure sign of insurrection, and insurrection against Caesar was as serious to Pilate as blasphemy against God was to the chief priests. It was a matter of loyalty, and disloyalty to the empire could not be tolerated. Whether he wanted to or not, Pilate had to act. His hand was being forced by the local authorities.

The interrogation did not go well. Pilate put his question to Jesus and Jesus replied not with an answer but with another question: “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” How Pilate came to his information about Jesus wasn't any of Jesus' business, and the presumption irked Pilate.

Of course others had told Pilate about Jesus – that was the job of the intelligence community. Their job was to keep the governor informed so that the peace could be maintained. And it wasn't as if Jesus was trying to conceal his activities. He kept going around the towns and villages talking about God's realm – whatever that was – where things were very different from the way they were in Caesar's realm.

In that realm, the poor weren't wretched, they were blessed. In that realm, it was the meek and not the go-getters who would inherit the earth. In that realm, the peace was maintained by turning the other cheek and by praying for your enemies rather than by eliminating them.

And on and on it went, and the lower classes loved it. They loved hearing about that other world that was so different from this world, and from someone who claimed to be from that world. Jesus really seemed to know what he was talking about. He spoke with an authority – confidently, and with miraculous signs of healing and caring for others – that the religious authorities lacked. This guy didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk. He lived as he taught. For him, it wasn't just words, words, words. The people who needed him most began to take him seriously. Maybe he could actually drain the swamp of oppressive business-as-usual. Maybe he was the Messiah the kicked-around Jewish people had been waiting for for so long.

And even if Jesus himself was reluctant to use that title, his followers weren't, and so word began to spread that a new king of the Jews had arrived to lead them to freedom from their current bondage under Rome just as Moses had led their ancestors to freedom from Egypt. It was an exciting time for the hundreds or even thousands of Jesus's followers.

But for other Jews it was another example of a trumped-up Messiah. For the Pharisees, the Saducees, the priests, and the scribes – the religious establishment, in other words – Jesus wasn't the Messiah they'd been told by their prophets to expect. Their religious tradition, going all the way back to the prophet Isaiah eight centuries earlier, had drawn a fairly clear picture of what the Messiah would do, and Jesus wasn't doing it. He wasn't throwing the Romans out. He wasn't lifting the yoke of oppression from the ordinary Jewish people. He wasn't uniting the Jewish people; if anything, he was dividing them even further.

And so they pushed back against their fellow Jews to try to show them that all of this talk about a new liberator was disloyal to Herod and to Caesar, and disloyalty would get them all into serious

trouble. Jesus needed to be silenced, and if they had to throw him under the bus to save the rest of their people from being indiscriminately punished – which was the Roman way of preserving the pax Romana – then so be it. An unfortunate but necessary step out of this mess.

And so the wheels of Roman justice began to turn. Pilate responded to Jesus' impertinent question with a question of his own.

“I'm not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?”

And instead of simply answering a simple question, Jesus starts talking about his kingdom not being from this world, and that if it were, his followers would be fighting at that very minute to keep him from being handed over to the Jews. But since they're not fighting to save their leader, therefore, his kingdom is not from this world. Get it?

Pilate didn't get it all. Pilate was an egg man, to use Grandma's saying, not a chicken man. He worked with the data he had in front of him, not with the theoretical or hypothetical or possible or spiritual. Pilate was a person of this world, not of that other world that Jesus kept going on about, the realm of God. Paul and other Christians would later use the term “worldly” to describe people like Pilate – anchored so firmly in this world they're blinded to anything beyond yet. Nothing eternal, nothing spiritual, nothing otherworldly. What you see is what you get and what there is is all there ever will be. It is what it is.

Pilate didn't know what the heck Jesus was talking about. What other world was there apart from this one? What sort of world would produce someone like Jesus? And if Jesus did have a kingdom from that world, as he claimed, then he and his followers had better get with the program of this world if they intended to change the kingdoms in it.

Pilate wasn't a stupid man, and this wasn't his first rodeo. He knew how the world worked and how the game was played. He'd played that game successfully enough to rise through its ranks to his current position of authority, responsibility, and power.

And the person he now had standing before him seemed otherworldly. He wasn't making any effort to defend himself. He wasn't looking for a legal loophole through which to wriggle free of his predicament. He wasn't enlisting the aid of the high and mighty or of his scruffy band of followers to deliver him from a serious situation. He wasn't offering to grease Pilate's palm in exchange for a lighter sentence. It seemed almost as though Jesus expected to find himself here in front of Pilate someday, telling him about the truth and his witnessing to it. “What is truth?” Pilate wondered out loud.

For Pilate and his followers, the truth was about the egg you have in front of you today rather than the chicken you may in front of you have someday. It's about the material rather than the spiritual. It's about the real rather than the possible. It's about this world and not some other world called the realm of God.

Pilate had no bone to pick with truth or beauty or honor or love or compassion or peace or justice or any other immaterial reality as long as they didn't distract from the business of getting things done in a very material world. And to get things done in this world, as everybody knows, you need a carrot and a stick, and you can't be timid with the stick. And it looked to Pilate as though Jesus had plenty of carrot and very little stick.

History would show that Pilate's observations were correct but that his conclusions were wrong. You can get things done in this world without a stick. Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection would prove that. The one without the stick standing before Pilate – without the stick, that is, except the stick of his shepherd's crook or the cross upon which he was soon to die – he would get far more

done in this world than Pilate or people in Pilate's image and likeness could even begin to imagine.

Jesus' followers would scatter as they ran for their lives when the hammer of Rome descended, but then they would later claim that Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, thereby restoring their trust in him and their commitment to his way of radical justice and radical peace. Those first followers of the Prince of Peace followed their leader with their lives and without the stick – or club or sword or spear or gun or weapon of mass destruction. Everyone thought that such a crazy, idealistic movement was doomed to disappear within a generation or two, and everyone turned out to be wrong.

Jesus' followers would drift through the world like milkweed fluff, taking Jesus with them, to found churches and schools and hospitals and monasteries. They would face incomprehension, resistance, opposition, persecution, and sometimes even martyrdom as they sought to testify to the truth of radical obedience to God's realm as Jesus had shown them. The temptation to become followers of Pilate's way rather than Jesus' way would never go away, and there would be plenty of so-called Christians in the coming centuries who would succumb to the pressure to conform to Pilate's way of ordinary, everyday violence – violence so pervasive and so subtle that neither its victims nor its perpetrators would recognize it as such. They would simply go along to get along and call the violence normal.

You and I are faced with that decision today, as every generation of Christians before us has been. Today is the last Sunday of the church year, when we celebrate the Reign of Christ. We Christians believe that the way of our crucified and risen savior – the way of the victim rather than the perpetrator of violence – is the only way that leads to God, and that Jesus' way will ultimately triumph, with us or without us. Jesus renounced violence in all its forms – legal or criminal, economic or military, subtle or brutal – and he called on his followers to take up their crosses – and not their swords – if they wished to follow him.

We don't have to, you know. Jesus doesn't force anyone to be his follower. We can follow Pilate's way or we can follow Jesus' way. We can follow the way that will make us look like everyone else in this bruised and busted world, or we can follow the way that will make us look different. It'll make us look weird. It'll make us look otherworldly. Thanks be to God for that way.