

The Lessons of Lent – Pointless Bravado

God grant us at all times, and especially during this sacred season of Lent, honesty and true humility. Amen.

Dear Fellow Recipients of Jesus' love and forgiveness, we have been searching the Passion history this year for the lessons our God would have us learn. This evening we find our sixth lesson in the 19th Chapter of John's Gospel:

ESV (John 19:19-22) Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹ So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

This is God's Word. We ask God the Holy Spirit to open our minds to understand and our hearts to believe all that he here desires to teach us as we pray, **"Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

Human beings share countless inherent character flaws. All are a result of sin – both the sin we inherited from Adam and the sins for which we alone are responsible. This evening we examine that strange human compulsion to appear strong, decisive, and in control, even when we are uncertain, afraid, or wrong. What is it that drives us to project such bravado? Bravado puts on a show. It raises its voice. It digs in its heels. It refuses to bend, not because it is right, but because it cannot bear to be seen as weak.

As we walk through the season of Lent, we are invited into something entirely different. Lent is not about posturing; it is about surrender. It is not about proving strength; it is about confessing weakness. It is not about defending ourselves; it is about laying ourselves bare before God.

In our text from John's Gospel, we see a striking contrast between human bravado and divine truth. On one side stands Pontius Pilate, a man of authority, power, and political calculation. On the other side hangs Jesus Christ, beaten, mocked, crucified—seemingly powerless. And yet it is in this moment that truth stands firm, while bravado is revealed as the artificial, hollow, pointless shell that it truly is. Our goal this evening is to learn both the weakness and the danger of pointless bravado and the power of humble surrender.

The sign that Pilate affixed to the cross of Jesus read, **"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."** The fact that Pilate wrote the inscription in three languages is telling: Aramaic (literally: the language of the Hebrews or Jews), Latin (literally: the language of Rome), and Greek (the common language of the Mediterranean world.) At the very least this tells us that Pilate wanted to make sure that every single person that saw the sign would be able to read it. What is less clear is Pilate's motive for writing what he did. A surprising number of Bible commentators believe the sign was the Roman Governor's public statement, *"This is what happens to those who oppose Roman rule."* Given all that we are told about Jesus' trial, this was almost certainly *not* the intended message. Jesus made it clear to Pilate that he had no desire to rule as an earthly king. Pilate clearly believed what Jesus told him, since he repeatedly told the Jews that he found no fault in the man – something he never would have said had he believed that Jesus posed any sort of threat to Roman authority. In other words, Pilate would have had no trouble crucifying Jesus if he believed that Jesus claimed to be Israel's earthly king.

The far more likely explanation was that Pilate wrote the sign to mock Jesus' enemies, and that he wrote the sign in three languages so that every single Jew that was visiting Jerusalem at that time to celebrate the Passover would be able to read it.

The sign, however, was only part of the pointless bravado that we find in our text. We find the most blatant example in Pilate's reply to the Jews when they tried to force him to edit the sign. There, finally, the weak, uncertain Pilate appears to take a strong, decisive position: **"What I have written I have written."**

Pure bravado. During Jesus' trial, when it really counted, Pilate demonstrated only weakness, indecision, and doubt: **"I find no fault in the man... I will release him... I will have him whipped... I will release him (not because he is innocent) but according to the custom at the time of the Passover... I will send him to Herod... I wash my hands of him..."** He tried bravado on Jesus, but Jesus recognized and immediately crushed it. Pilate: **"Don't you know that I have the power to release or crucify you?"** Jesus' response: **"You would have no power at all unless it had been given to you from above."**

Like a "garbage time" touchdown with 10 seconds left in the game and your team trailing by 40 points, Pilate proudly takes a stand by refusing to edit his sign – when it no longer mattered, when the great injustice had already been carried out. Again, pure, pointless bravado. Yet what undoubtedly escaped Pilate was the divine truth that his sign inadvertently proclaimed: **"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."** God often does that, doesn't he – he takes the foolish proclamations and faux wisdom of man and turns them into declarations of divine truth. The Jews at Mt. Sinai lamented, **"We can't bear to hear this terrible voice of God. Send us a mediator."** God's reply, **"I will do just that, but it's not what you think."** Caiaphas proudly and blasphemously proclaimed, **"You know nothing at all... it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."** Again God's reply, **"Very true, but not the way you mean it."** The Athenian philosophers acknowledged the existence of the God that was unknown to them, but then refused to listen when Paul identified that true God. So also here with Pilate's sign. God used what was likely meant as ridicule to proclaim absolute, divine truth: the Jews were crucifying their own King. Here, as elsewhere, we are witnessing the fulfillment of what this same Apostle John wrote earlier in this same Gospel: **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**^{ESV} (John 1:5)

The chief priests immediately object to Pilate's sign and demand that he change it. Why? Why does this matter so much to them and why did Pilate refuse? Certainly the Jews knew that the sign as written made them look like fools, like they had crucified their own king, but it was probably more about control. All bravado is, at least to a certain extent, about control. Failing to recognize that Jesus had actually been in control from start to finish, the Jews imagined that *they* were. They had, after all, forced their will onto the hapless Governor and had succeeded in executing their enemy. They were, as they say, "feeling it," and probably assumed they could continue to exercise their imagined control when they ordered Pilate to change the sign. Pilate, on the other hand, had allowed himself to be bullied, to be controlled, so he made his hollow stand: **"What I have written I have written."** This was not only pure bravado, it was *pointless* bravado.

Neither Pilate nor the chief priests were defending accuracy; they were defending ego. They wanted control over the narrative, control over how their role would be communicated to and perceived by others. It apparently never occurred to either party that God is not fooled by the bravado of man.

As always, we need to make the transition from spectator to participant. We need to shift from reading these words as a letter written to someone else to reading them as a hand-written letter

with our name on it. The reality is that we too routinely attempt to reshape truth to make ourselves look better. We soften our convictions to avoid discomfort, and we excuse our own sin – even the very same sins we eagerly condemn in others – to portray piety. We are, in other words, equally guilty of bravado – even *spiritual* bravado – standing firm, but not in truth. In self-promotion. And it is *pointless* bravado because God is never fooled.

We can learn still more here from Pilate. Pilate had already compromised when it mattered most. Now, when confronted about a sign—something small and mostly symbolic—he suddenly stands firm. He is comfortable doing so now, because now it costs him nothing. There is no longer any risk, nothing at stake. He has already failed the great test. Jesus is already on the cross, so Pilate’s authority is no longer being tested in any meaningful way. But that’s really the nature of bravado, isn’t it. It’s not only fake, it cannot stand up under even moderate pressure. It’s like the adolescent male who struts about like he’s a battle-hardened tough guy but then screams and runs at the first sign of real danger.

Pilate’s statement, “***What I have written I have written***” echoes with finality, but it is ultimately empty. It changes nothing. It redeems nothing. It corrects nothing. It is a movie set, a shell without substance. That is both the nature and the danger of pointless bravado. It gives the illusion of strength while accomplishing nothing of true value. Ask Peter, who swore he would fight to the death, only to run from a servant girl.

Bravado exalts self. Humility exalts God. Bravado defends image. Humility seeks truth. Bravado abhors correction. Humility welcomes transformation.

At all times, but especially during Lent, we examine our hearts: Am I holding onto pride instead of surrender? Am I projecting strength instead of admitting weakness? Am I standing firm in appearance but failing in obedience? Bravado says, “I am fine.” Lent says, “I need mercy.” Bravado says, “I will stand my ground.” Lent says, “I will fall on my knees.” Bravado says, “I will defend myself.” Lent says, “I will confess my sin.” The beauty of the gospel is that when we lay down our pride, we do not lose—we gain the very thing we need the most.

In fact in all of this, the One – the *only* One – who knew nothing of bravado was Jesus. Though he is the only one who possesses true authority and divine power, Jesus remained silent. No defense. No correction. No assertion of His rights. Yet his silence is not weakness. It is strength under control. Jesus does not need to prove himself because he knows exactly who he is. And because he knows, he has no need for bravado. This is one of the great lessons of Lent: when your identity is secure in your Savior, you will see no need to pretend to others to be anything other than exactly who and what you are.

One question remains: what will *your* sign read? What will be your epitaph? Will it be the pointless bravado of “Here lies a great human being” or “Here lies a sinner, redeemed by Christ the Crucified”? Will the sign that you write with your life point to you or to your Savior? The cross strips away every illusion of self-sufficiency. It reminds us that we cannot save ourselves, cannot justify ourselves, cannot redeem our own failures. Only Christ can, and he has. Not through force, not through pretense, not through bravado. Through his sacrifice. Amen