

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Last Sunday after Pentecost, November 25, 2018.

We have a very interesting set of lessons this morning, I want to begin with the passage from John's gospel (**John 18:33-37**).

It has a little Abbot and Costello feel. If your children or grandchildren are struggling with math in school, they will enjoy the video available on-line of a math problem featuring the two gentlemen. And if you have ever disagreed with a landlord about the rent you owe, you will enjoy the video as well.

At any rate, the basis of the Abbot and Costello comedy is similar to the meeting between Jesus and Pilate. They don't talk the same language. When Jesus responds to Pilate, Pilate doesn't get it. "Pilate asks him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answers, 'You say that I am a king,'" suggesting to Pilate that he, Pilate, doesn't understand. Jesus drives home the point by saying that "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." A not-so-little dig that I'm sure Pilate didn't appreciate.

We have had these conversations with people about all sorts of things, including perhaps our religious beliefs and practices. Imagine a person curious about what we do on Sunday mornings. And then imagine us saying to that person, "Before you visit, I want you to read the Book of Daniel (**Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14**). This will be a helpful introduction." So, the person reads today's passage, and says, "I just don't get it. Is there something else I can read?" "Sure, here's a passage from the Book of Revelation (**Revelation 1:4b-8**). This should help."

Well, if the person is really curious, he or she will read the passages and conclude that what drives you and me is someone who claims to be the "Alpha and Omega," but who doesn't have the traditional trappings of authority. Someone "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

"Is that really what you believe?" And here's our response: "Yes, that is really what we believe." Which leads the other person to say perhaps, "Okay, Whatever works for you. For me, I think I'll pass, thank you very much."

So, there we have it. People speaking different languages. Not as in English and Russian, but as in “I don’t get you, and you seem not to get me.” It’s not a mean-spirited conversation. It’s just an honest difference in approaches or starting points.

Look at Pilate. He was trying to understand. He was curious. “What have you done, that your own nation and your own chief priests have handed you over to me? I don’t get it. Help me to understand.” The answer of Jesus is not very helpful, at least to Pilate. “My kingdom is not of this world. That’s why my followers aren’t putting up a fight.” Pilate continues the conversation: “So are you a king? Help me to understand before I have to make a decision about you.” Jesus responds, “You say that I am a King.”

Again, not helpful to Pilate. So Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, telling Herod that he, Pilate, has no charge against Jesus. Herod sends him back to Pilate. Pilate indicates that he will let Jesus go. But the crowd wants a different outcome. Egged on by the authorities, the crowd yells, “Crucify him.” Pilate, no doubt tired of the whole mess, eventually lets the crowd have its way.

End of story? Not yet! God raises the crucified and dead Jesus to new life. The earlier words of Jesus to Pilate are prophetic: “For this I was born.” Not born to die – end of story - but born to die and live again – beginning of a new chapter in the story.

Interestingly today’s Psalm (**Psalm 93**) foretells what would happen centuries later. The psalmist is describing the Lord. It’s a beautiful description of the Alpha and Omega. “Ever since the world began, your throne has been established; you are from everlasting. Your testimonies are very sure, and holiness adorns your house, O Lord, for ever and for evermore.”

It all comes together in a manner that makes sense to you and me thousands of years later. But it has never been a story easy to understand. We have been in Pilate’s shoes, haven’t we? We’ve asked Jesus the question: “What’s with you, anyway? Every time I think I understand you, something happens to confuse me. Help me out here.”

So, here's a dilemma that you and I might have this very moment. We have a friend who wants to know what it is that we believe. And, when we share our belief with the friend, the friend says "I still don't get it." To which, we can honestly respond, "Hey, I'm learning too. Let's learn together."

And right here there is an opening. Language that once was a roadblock has become an opportunity. The next time we invite our friend to come to a worship service or to Bible Study or to a social hour, the friend just might say "Okay, I'm in, but no promises." And our response might be, "Deal."

We don't have to close the deal. If it is to be closed, it will be God the Holy Spirit who plays the decisive role, a role that just might be in response to this morning's Collect: "Mercifully grant that the people of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin – translation: radically different approaches to Truth – may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule."

Our final hymn today, #382, is really beautiful. It describes just how good, how whole, we can feel when all our questions, all our different approaches, find common ground.

King of glory, King of peace, I will love thee.
Wherefore with my utmost art, I will sing thee.
Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee.

Imagine Pilate and Jesus eventually reaching a point in their conversation that permits Pilate to join Jesus in these words: love, sing and praise. But it is not up to us to rewrite the unfolding of God's plan. Pilate had a role to play, which he did. And Jesus had a role to play, which he did. And here we are, twenty plus centuries later, deeply grateful that this Story has come down to us, and deeply honored that its Good News is now our responsibility and privilege to proclaim, with continuing guidance of course from the Holy Spirit.

From Psalm 93: "Ever since the world began, your throne, O Lord, has been established; you are from everlasting." No confusion here. That's now our story, we we're sticking to it. And we are ready and willing to share it in an open and honest and collaborative and non-judgmental manner. That's a pretty special assignment, for which we say, "Thank you, Lord." Amen.