

Give Us Barabbas
Mark 15:1-20, Romans 7:15-25
First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
June 13, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver

Not long ago I found myself in a very interesting discussion with a young man who serves as an Arabic language translator in the US Air Force. We chatted about his job for a while, and then I asked him what he liked to do when he wasn't hunting down the Al-Qaeda. He said that he liked to read history. "In fact, I am currently reading about the most famous terrorist in American history. Do you know who that is?" The "terrorist" to whom he was referring was a young man who spent a bit of time around these parts early in his career...George Washington.

I started to protest that George Washington was hardly a "terrorist" in the same league as Osama bin Laden or Moammar Qaddafi, but he said, "Really, the vocabulary all depends on your perspective. We think of George Washington as a freedom fighter, a noble patriot who birthed our nation. But his contemporaries in England saw him as a murdering insurrectionist who broke all the rules of warfare – he was a threat who had to be eliminated."

You know that's the truth...that whoever writes the story gets to pick out the words that are used. For instance, there's a story in this week's *Chicago Tribune* about Marian Hossa, the second Blackhawk to hoist the Stanley Cup after winning it on Wednesday night, that refers to him as "huge" and "a monster" and the go-to guy for the team. I might be wrong, but my sense is that many Penguins fans remember Hossa a little differently.

Who names you? Who decides who you are?

This is a photo from the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. We are looking over Pilate's shoulder at Jesus, who is surrounded by the religious leaders, soldiers from Rome, a crowd of people from Jerusalem, and various other hangers-on. Try to picture the

scene of this trial in your head. You heard the reading a few moments ago. The religious leaders – the counsel of priests and elders and scribes and Pharisees – they took Jesus to the center of Roman power in Jerusalem and asked Pilate to do what they could not, by Roman law, do by themselves. They said, “We’ve already condemned him, but we’d like you to execute him. We say he’s a treasonous presence – he is disloyal to Rome and to the Emperor.” In that light, on that day, Jesus doesn’t stand a chance. Pilate knows that Jesus isn’t guilty of anything close to a capital offense, but he is a cagey politician who sees the chance to work with some folks who are typically opposed to him.

He questions Jesus, who is non-committal at best. Then Pilate produces another prisoner, Barabbas. Whereas some people hoped that Jesus might lead a revolt, Barabbas already had. Some people were frustrated that Jesus was such a pacifist, but Barabbas had no problem taking up arms against anyone who stood in his way. Barabbas was a bold, decisive, violent man. And Pilate says, “You can choose. One of these men will go free, the other will die.” One is a true ‘freedom fighter’, a terrorist, an insurrectionist, a murderer...and the other is accused of those things because it’s convenient. Who will live? Who will die?

In a classic understanding of the Christian theory of atonement, we are all Barabbas. In this story, Mark presents us with a picture of a man who is clearly guilty of all manner of sin who is released from the consequence of that sin because another, sinless, man has taken his place. You can see your kinship with Barabbas, can’t you? That man deserved to die, yet somehow Jesus took the penalty that Barabbas deserved and died instead. For thousands of years, the church has taught that our own forgiveness is no less dramatic than that of the terrorist who was released even as Jesus was bound over for death.

In fact, his name has significance. In the Aramaic, “Bar” means “son of”, and “Abba” means “father”. “Barabbas” means “son of the father”, and it could be a way of saying “everyman”. You are Barabbas. I am Barabbas. We are all children of the Father who get what we do not deserve, thanks be to God.

But this week, even as I held the truth of that wonderful equation where I get forgiveness that I do not deserve, I was fascinated with another question. When standing in that courtyard, face to face with Pilate, looking both Jesus and Barabbas in the eye...who chooses Barabbas? I mean, there is a lot of gray area in our lives, but this wouldn't seem to be a situation like that. It's pretty clear cut – it's a yes/no, black/white, hot/cold deal here, isn't it? In this corner, wearing the white robe and the beatific expression, you've got the kindest, holiest, wisest man that the world has ever seen. And in that corner, wearing the brown robe and the leering expression, you've got a murdering, violent, brutish man who is regarded by some as public enemy #1. When you've got that choice, who calls for Barabbas to be set free and Jesus to be killed?

Really, who does that? Who chooses conflict instead of peace? Who chooses death over life? Who chooses dis-ease instead of healing?

I do. You do. All God's children do. Isn't that our story?

Think about the events of the last couple of months. We had 29 people die in a coal mine disaster in April. A couple of weeks later, the oil platform was destroyed and crude oil started flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. Those are terrible, terrible events. But have I changed my energy consumption at all? Have I thought, for a moment, about whether or not my hunger for cheap energy makes me complicit in these disasters?

How often do we choose what we know will hurt us? How often do we walk willingly towards that which we know is bad for us?

Today there is a mother who grieves the loss of a son because he overdosed on drugs...there is a man who is trying to rebuild a life that was shattered when he told a lie to a friend and then worked to cover it up...there are dozens of us in this room who will, today, gladly overeat, or smoke, or drink ourselves one step closer to oblivion. We nurse our grudges and treasure our

anger and stoke our hatred and nurture our pride. Who wants Barabbas? We all do. Every day, we choose that which is deadly and destructive over that which is vibrant and life-giving.

I have no right to be shocked at a first-century crowd that yells for Pilate to release a murderer instead of the Lord of Life because every day I walk away from God's best for me and open myself up to that which I know would kill me if given half a chance. When Mark writes of the crowd that chants release for Barabbas and death for Jesus, he is not only telling history, he is telling our story. He is telling my story. The things that I want are often the things that make for death.

Paul, writing thirty or forty years after the fact, understands this well when he looks at his own life and says, "Wretched man that I am...who will rescue me?" Even when we know what we ought to do, and how we ought to choose, so often we are powerless to do the right thing.

We don't need more choices, we don't need more answers. We need a new way of living. We've tried the Judas way of self-preservation, the Peter way of following fearfully; we've tried the Pilate way of standing off to the side pretending that the whole thing doesn't really concern us; we've tried the Pharisees way of placing all the blame on someone else. And none of these strategies have brought us any closer to being the kind of people that we wish we were.

When Christians in the first century read Mark's gospel, they were the minority of a minority. Jesus wasn't remotely famous at this point. The calendars didn't read "BC" and "AD". Jesus was an insignificant Galilean who met an untimely death at the hands of the Roman system of legal justice. The only people to which Jesus had any relevance or significance were the small groups of Christians scattered through the Empire.

And it is that Jesus who calls out to his disciples in the first century and in the twenty-first century, "Follow me." This day, as we look at the horror of a trial which ought never to have

happened in the first place, he stands to the side and says, “Follow me.” Come and learn the way of the one who speaks honestly and truly to others; the one who gives and forgives with generosity and love; the one who challenges injustice and speaks truth to the darker parts of our own nature; the one who walks in the way of service and sacrifice.

It seems to me that our problem is not, primarily, one of belief. We don’t need a fresher set of truths or a nobler package of ideas in which to believe. We need a path to follow, and we need guides who will help us to get there.

Which is why this is an appropriate reading for the day that we commission our Cross Trainers and our Connectors. In a few moments, we’ll ask those people who have accepted the responsibility to lead us in these ministries to come forward and we will ask you questions – questions about your willingness to follow in the way of Jesus.

Here’s the truth: 21st century Pittsburgh is every bit as alien to the Jesus way as was 1st century Rome. We know a lot more about beliefs than they did, perhaps. The doctrines have been passed down just fine...but the lifestyle that flows from those doctrines – the sense in which we are able to make different choices – that we don’t have to choose that which will kill us – that’s as much a challenge now as it ever was.

It’s not about learning the answers – it’s about knowing that we are not alone on the journey, and about being able to trust the people who are walking with us. When you come before us and say that you want to lead us in ministry, remind us that what we want, so often, will kill us. Give us a holy imagination so that we can see a new way of living. Help us, in you, to see Jesus.

Fundamentally, friends, we’re not asking you to do anything other than to walk with us and to encourage us to stay the course, even when there are times when we won’t want you to. Pray for us, even when we say it doesn’t matter. Invite us to consider life even on the days that we insist on playing around with death.

For Mark's readers, the path of discipleship was costly and dangerous. It seems to me that the only way that people in this community will be able to turn our backs on the things that will kill us and walk towards the Lord of Life is if we have trusted friends who will help us to hear the truth day in and day out. So Cross Trainers and Connectors, please, do this for us. And help us grow to the place where we are doing it for others. In the name of Jesus who led the way for all of us, Amen.