

# TAKING A STAND WITH JESUS

## Romans 8:1-14

A few years ago, archeologists discover a seat dedicated to Caesar Augustus by one named Pontius Pilate in the Roman Amphitheatre at Caesarea-Philippi where Pilate lived avoiding Jerusalem as much as possible.

It is the only evidence, outside of the Bible—that Pilate ever lived. Yet he lives in our memory because of Jesus.

Pilate is best known for washing his hands after he sentenced Jesus to death.

He also represents so many of us who can't see the truth beyond our own truth as the truth stands before him testifying to the truth:

*"I was born and came into this world to bear witness to the truth."*

This small tiny man responds:

*"What is the truth?"* (John 19:37c-38)

Writers of the gospels of John and Matthew work very hard not to put the blame on Pilate for the death of Jesus as they would place the guilt of the murder of Jesus not only on the Jewish leaders but on the Jewish people themselves:

*"His blood be upon us and our children."* (Matthew 27:25)  
Anti-Semitism's demon was summoned to spread terror and oppression over two millenniums climaxing in the murder of six million Jews in the holocaust.

So let us take a moment to see what is working in the mind of Pilate who seeks every evasion of responsibility for what he is about to do.

Pilate is already compromised by the time Jesus was brought before him for trial as Caiaphas, the high priest, had Pilate in a corner.

Pilate had foolishly placed images of Caesar  
on the temple of Antonia in Jerusalem.

Caiaphas filled the streets with protesters  
praying loudly to God that Pilate would remove  
the idol images offensive to every Jew.

Pilate was tempted to use force but was afraid of Rome  
that was already critical of the young governor.

Pilate gave into to Caiaphas. It was not the first time.

When Caiaphas sends to him a Galilean prophet  
on the trumped charged he claimed to be King of the Jews  
a treasonous act, Pilate is under pressure to execute this man.

To make matters worse Pilate's sensitive wife Claudia  
had a dream about Jesus warning Pilate  
to have nothing to do with this just man...  
he was innocent.

Suspecting the innocence of Jesus as his wife warned  
came once he had talked with Jesus...he wanted to remain neutral.  
Yet, he could not get out of the clutches of Caiaphas.  
Pilate was compromised.

What does a compromised person do?

Unable to know the right and do it

Pilate **sought to get out of it.** His first mistake.

Pilate is diminishing, becoming a small man.

He tells Caiaphas to try Jesus himself.

*"Take him and judge this Galilean by your own laws."*

Again, he is trapped by his nemesis.

*"We are not allowed to put a man to death."*

Pilate got the message.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council,  
had already sentenced Jesus to death.

In effect, they were saying,  
it is your job as high executioner of Roman law  
to send this Galilean to die on a Roman cross.

For only the Romans had authority over cases of treason.  
“*You must crucify him.*” Pilate did not want to hear it.

Cornered, what does a compromised person do?

Pilate sought to **shift responsibility**.

His second fatal mistake.

Whatever integrity, whatever dignity Pilate had,  
he threw away by giving the decision over to the mob.

It was the custom to release a prisoner on a festival day.

Let the crowd choose.

He would put before them the choice—

Barabbas, a convicted murderer, or Jesus

a man whom he found not guilty of any crime.

“*Who would you have me release—Jesus Barabbas or Jesus Christ?*”

The mob cried out their verdict—“*Give us Barabbas.*”

Pilate had his hands full and finally

He asks the haunting question that comes

down to us through the centuries—

“*What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?*”

That is your question and mine.

We cannot shrink from it. We cannot get out of it.

We cannot be neutral about it. We must decide.

Every one of us has Christ on our hands.

We must decide for him or decide against him.

Jesus made it clear. “*Either you are for me or against me.*”

There is no room for compromise.

When Christ is on trial in our daily lives

\*

Martin Niemoller was a leader of the Lutheran Church in Germany  
who said nothing when Hitler came to power in 1933.

He said nothing when the Nazis took the communists and Jews  
to concentration camps.

He was a patriot who served  
as a submarine commander in WWI.

But when Hitler demanded a loyalty oath  
from Protestant and Catholic clergy alike...  
he had to take a stand for Jesus.

Christ and his church was on trial.

Niemoller took his stand in a sermon  
that was published through out German and in other nations  
like the United States. The title of the sermon “CHRIST MY FUEHER.”

Hitler had made it clear that the Church  
would have to “Heil, Hitler.”—  
giving Hitler authority over all worldly affairs  
leaving the affairs of heaven to the Church was a betrayal of Christ.

Hadn't Jesus said to Pilate—

*“My kingship is not of this world,  
if my kingdom was of this world,  
my servants would fight, that I may not be  
handed over to the Jews,  
but my kingship is not from the world.”* (John 18:36)

This was just fine with Hitler.

He would compromise the Christian Church by creating  
a German Church that would be loyal to Hitler.

Hitler knew its servants would not fight.

But they did. Seven thousand German pastors proved Hitler wrong.

It is a bright page in the history of the Church  
when these pastors took their stand with Christ.

Many in the church defied Hitler's government by refusing  
to sign an oath of allegiance to the German Church  
in effect replacing the Cross with the Swastika.

Rather, they signed their names, to a brave declaration:

**“Obedience to the Reich Church government  
is disobedience to God. We will go to prison  
or suffering any punishment  
before we sign this oath.”**

After they signed the declaration they sang Luther's great hymn  
**"A Mighty Fortress is our God."**

Its words strong, its purpose sure—to stand with Christ.

**"Did we in our own strength confide,  
our striving would be losing,  
were not the right man on our side,  
the man of God's own choosing.  
Doest ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is he;....**

**"And though this world, with devils filled,  
should threaten to undo us, we will not fear,  
for God has willed his truth to triumph through us.  
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him,  
his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure;  
one little word shall fell him."**

Martin Niemoller was one of those who signed the declaration.  
He took a stand with Christ and he paid for it as many did.

The SS came to arrest him in July 1937 and  
put on trial in February 1938  
and found guilty—as Jesus was—of treason.

He would spend the years 1938 to the liberation in 1945  
in Dachau, a concentration camp  
reserved for unpatriotic Germans.

Last December I met Harold Marcuse  
the grandson of the famous German philosopher Herbert Marcuse.

Harold is an authority on concentration camps and their history.  
Harold writes of what happened to Martin Niemoller after the war.  
What I now share comes from Harold's research.

Niemoller had written letters to his wife from Dachau.  
When he returned home she wanted him to take her to Dachau.

**"Couldn't I see your cell, where you were imprisoned  
for the past four years?"**

He drove his wife there to see his cell.

Then he writes, “Then something happened.

When we came out the American officer accompanying us led us along a wall. I had often walked along it.

There was a large gate in it. I had never seen it open.

This time it was open. I knew what was behind it, but entered it anyway.

I stood with my wife in front of a crematorium in Dachau and on a tree in front of this building

there was a white-painted board with black lettering.

There one could read: ‘Here in the years 1933-1945

238,756 people were cremated.’ When I read it aloud,

I noticed that my wife fainted when she read

the quarter-million number. That hadn’t moved me.

Because it didn’t tell me anything new.

What ran through me hot and cold at that moment

was something else. That was the other two numbers: ‘1933-1945.

*I groped for my alibi and knew that the two numbers*

*were the wanted posters of the living God for Pastor Niemoller.*

My alibi reached from July 1, 1937 to mid-1945.

There stood ‘1933-1945.’ Adam, where are you?

Mensch, where were you?

Yes, I know, from mid-1937 until the end you have an alibi.

Here you’re being asked: ‘Where were you from

1933 until July 1, 1937?’ And I couldn’t avoid the question any longer.

In 1933 I was a free man. 1933—at that moment

in the crematorium yard it occurred to me, yes, 1933, that’s right:

Herman Goring boasted publicly

that he had gotten rid of the Communists danger.

Since all Communists who were not under lock or key

because of their crimes were now sitting behind the barbed wire of the newly established concentration camps.

Adam, where are you?

*Hey, Martin Niemoller, where were you then?*

*asked God with those two numbers.*

*And then it occurred to me:  
this whole thing had made no impression on me;  
somewhere in a corner of my heart I may have thought,  
at least later I did think: this is a cheap way  
to actually be rid of the danger of godlessness.*  
But that these people, with no law, no criminal charges,  
no investigation, no sentence, no enforceable sentence,  
simply had their profession, their family, their lives taken from them,  
deprived of their freedom,  
that *they were God's question put to me  
to which I in God's eyes should have answered,  
that did not occur to me.*  
But then I was a free man.  
Back then I had already given myself over to my true responsibility.  
And now the wanted poster was there,  
and I couldn't avoid this wanted poster any longer.

And on that day, when we got home,  
I read the chapter Matthew 25 with new meaning:  
“I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat;  
I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink;  
I was sick and in prison and you did not come to me.”

*As a Christian I could have known and should have known in 1933  
that in each of these human brothers—  
may they be called Communist or whatever—  
God in Jesus Christ was asking me  
whether I wouldn't want to serve him.”*

Pastor Martin Niemoller spoke in this country  
and was greatly admired for speaking out.  
He would go on to write a parable about those  
who refuse to stand with Christ.  
It is titled **“The Hang Man.”**

“One day Death came to town.  
Death went to the market place  
and began to build a scaffold for all around to see.  
The people came out of their homes  
to watch Death work erecting its gallows tree.  
They were afraid. Why had Death come to their community?

Then death said, ‘I have come for the Jew.  
Where is the Jew among you?’  
The people sighed in relief.  
Death had not come for them...only for the Jew.  
They brought the Jew to Death  
and Death hung him in the marketplace for all to see.  
And Death left after taking down its bloody tree  
and all the people went back home...  
relieved Death had not come for me.

But the next day Death had come again  
awakening the town by its deadly blows  
hammering the scaffold from out its folds.  
The people were stirred by fear  
why had Death come back to be so near?

And Death with its broad assuring smile said,  
‘I have come for the black man, instead.’  
The people sighed. Death had not come for them.  
And the black man was delivered up to death  
to hang suspended high in death’s tall tree.  
The people went home...relieved  
Death had not come for me.

Death did not stay away.  
Back again the very next day  
the dark figure came to lay  
another life on gallows’ boughs.  
Each day Death came asking for one more.

**‘Give me the labor organizer.  
Give me the intellectual.  
Give me the discontent.  
Give me the retarded.  
Give me the homosexual.  
Give me your neighbor.  
Give me but one more and I will come no more.’  
And the people believed and gave  
all that was asked for Death’s mass grave.**

**But Death came back one more day.  
Death set up its deadly tree and asked for me.  
I had not lifted my hands to save one soul.  
I had kept silent, afraid.  
Now it was too late, I could see,  
no one was left to speak, to stand with  
the day Death asked for me.”**

One can never compromise with death and evil.  
Jesus knew this and took a stand against  
these insidious forces that rule the lives of people.  
These very forces are behind Jesus’ trial.  
There is no compromise when Jesus is on trial.  
For when Jesus is on trial...  
so you and I are on trial.  
    Either we go with Jesus or we reject him.  
    Either we take our stand with Jesus  
    or we join those who stand against him.

We who follow Christ will face evil whom Christ came to defeat.  
It is here the abundant life in Christ meets its cross of choosing.  
    The cross cannot be escaped.  
    If the cross is escaped through compromise or being neutral...  
    then its sequel is escaped.  
        The resurrection!  
        You may save yourself but you will lose what God has for you.

You may be too mindful of yourself  
you are not able to forget yourself into greatness!

If you refuse to take your stand with Jesus  
refusing to face up to opposition...  
compromising, taking the path of least resistance—  
then you will not be a resurrected personality  
raised to greatness!

Paul offers us this promise  
that you and I are destined for glory's greatness.

*"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,  
He who raise Christ from the dead will give life  
to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."* (Rom. 8:11)

God has destined you for glory's greatness.  
But the road to glory is the way of the cross.

You will have to face your Pilate eventually.  
The most powerful temptation in my life  
has not being doing something criminal...  
but to do nothing before what is criminal!

To acquiesce, to be still when I should speak out!  
Take a neutral shade when I ought to stand out!  
We have been warned about doing wrong  
but why haven't we been encouraged more  
to stand up for what is right  
as God gives us to see the right.  
It is this compromise with truth  
that has undone more souls.

When we do not stand with Jesus  
we erect another cross.

Be it the cross of indifference.

Be it the cross passivity, neutrality.

It is then we become part of the crowd  
who stood by and watched Jesus being crucified.

The Apostle's Creed remembers Pilate for only one reason.

*"Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate."*

That's not quite true.

Jesus suffered **with** Pilate and **for** Pilate.

You must face your Pilate.

You must face the spirit of compromise.

You must face the spirit of neutrality.

You must face the insidious ways of indifference  
for you have Christ on your hands.

God sent Jesus into the world

and the world has put him on trial to this very day.

Where do you stand?

*"What will I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"*