



“A Higher Power”

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Hayward, California*

*Reign of Christ Sunday
Nov. 22, 2009
John 18:33-37 (NRSV)*

The primary text for today’s sermon is taken from the gospel of John. It’s helpful to know that John’s gospel, more than any of the others, was written within the context of a faith community living under siege. John’s community known euphemistical as “the community of beloved disciples” was under siege by the religious and political authorities, whose allegiance were to Caiaphas the High Priest, and Caesar, the emperor of Rome.

John was the last of the four gospels to be written, and was written somewhere between 80 and 100 AD. The other three gospels were written ten to thirty years earlier.

John’s gospel was written as more of an impressionistic rather than an historical document. The author of John was far more concerned with the *meaning* of the events he was recounting than with historical facts about the life and ministry of Jesus.

A primary concern of John’s gospel was how to be faithful to the gospel in a context that was hostile to Jesus’ message. Put in modern terms, we might say that the community of beloved disciples was “marching to the beat of a different drummer.”

Though of Jewish origins, the Johannine community did *not* set their moral compass on the teachings and leadership of Caiaphas, who in this passage has just turned Jesus over to Pilate, and though citizens of Judah, the Johannine community did not accept the rule of Pilate, or Caesar. Their sole loyalty was to Christ the King.

The Johannine community understood themselves to be accountable to a higher power, and though they knew that they would pay a price for this loyalty, they still persisted in faith. They saw Christ as the preeminent way to resist the rule of lesser authorities, and they strove to follow his example.

Today’s gospel reading recounts a paramount example from Jesus’ life illustrating his “more excellent way” for the Johannine community.

Some consider the story of Jesus’ trial before Pilate as insignificant, because it’s an obscure embellishment of the life of the historical Jesus. Others, by contrast, see it as a

window into the human struggle that we all experience as we strive to determine what our lives will be about and to whom and on what we will set our moral compasses.

Consider the experience of two real people's lives that follow and that echo the meaning of this gospel story, and add your own to the mix, and see what you think. Is today's gospel reading some obscure embellishment on the life of the historical Jesus, or is it an illustration of the archetypal human drama with which we all must one day grapple?

The first example comes from the life of a young man named Jorge, who is associated with a friend's parish here in the Bay Area and the second is about a woman, whose name is Jane, who lives back East. I'll begin with a little window into Jorge's life.

II

It didn't take a lot of imagination to figure out how Jorge ended up in Juvenile Hall. He would tell you himself that he was a gangbanger and that like a lot of kids from his neighborhood, he joined a gang because it seemed like the only way to have any protection from other gangs, to have friends, and to secure the material things that he wanted, e.g., a particular style and brand of tennis shoes and clothes, entertainment equipment, knives and a handgun, and maybe a car.

The gang that Jorge fell in with wasn't particularly "big time," but they were bad enough. They were mostly into protecting their turf. They sold methamphetamines and used the profits to purchase guns and ammunition.

Thankfully, Jorge never became a drug addict, but he peddled drugs and contributed to the addictions of others. When he was 15 he was caught in a police sting designed to shut down a meth lab. He and his buddies were booked for the possession and sale of illicit drugs. This was not Jorge's first offense. He'd been picked up before on smaller charges, including tagging, petty theft, and driving without a valid license.

The judge that Jorge drew took a dim view of gangs, and was determined to clamp down on him and his buddies. The whole crew was tried, convicted, and sentenced to the maximum jail time allowable for their offenses. After sentencing the gangsters were sent to different houses of detention with the purpose of breaking up the gang, or at the very least—breaking up their friendships.

Jorge might have turned out like a lot of other gangbangers, except that his father had a kind of "come-to-Jesus" experience when he saw his son go to jail. Rather than giving up on Jorge, his dad made a late but concerted effort to build a stronger relationship with him. This fatherly commitment seemed to make all of the difference in the world to Jorge, who responded positively to parental attention and the structure of the penal system.

While he was in jail, Jorge attended classes and completed his GED. He started to learn a trade and his sentence was commuted for good behavior. When he got out of jail,

Jorge vowed that he would never go back. He took responsibility for a child that he fathered before he was sentenced, and he made a commitment to help keep other kids from joining gangs. Today Jorge is helping to develop a gang-prevention program in the Bay Area, which is associated with his parish.

By Jorge's account, his transformation occurred because of his father's love and support, which instilled in him a deeper sense of self-worth and inspired him to claim his own power, make something of himself, and improve his community. To borrow a phrase from John, Jorge followed "the more excellent way."

That was Jorge's story. Now consider Jane's story.

III

Jane grew up on "the other side of town" metaphorically speaking from Jorge. On the surface and in many ways, Jane and Jorge's lives were worlds apart. Jane lived back east, and was old enough to have been Jorge's great grandmother when I met her.

She was attractive, wealthy, and well educated. She was blessed to have had a college education in her younger years, and to have pursued a career that she could take or leave as her children came and went.

Jane's husband was intelligent, ambitious, and successful. The couple had three capable children, who went to the best colleges, and who married well and were advancing quickly in their own careers.

Jane and her husband had two homes: one at the lake and one in an older, prestigious neighborhood in the city. They were well liked, had lots of friends, and enjoyed numerous social invitations.

Compared with Jorge, Jane seemed to have everything, but under closer analysis her life at certain points in the past had been as much of a mess as Jorge's was, or even more so. Jane was an alcoholic. She doesn't hide that fact any more.

Stories differ as to how Jane ended up a drunk. According to her, she started drinking when her ex-husband began seeing her best friend, to whom he is now married.

Jane's ex-husband and ex-best friend tell the story differently. They say that their relationship was born out of mutual attempts to "help" Jane address her drinking problem.

Friends started noticing and then talking about how Jane was getting sloshed at virtually every Bridge Club meeting she attended, so they pressed Ann to talk with Jane about her problem and to encourage Jane to get some help.

Ann screwed up her courage and spoke to Jane, but Jane pooh-poohed her concerns comments, and became offended when Ann wouldn't make light of the situation.

Having failed at her attempt to intervene, Ann decided to take her concern to Bill, Jane's husband. Bill shared the concern and was even more worried given that her friends could see the problem too. Ann and Bill agreed given that his personal interventions had also failed that he would consult their family physician and ask for advice about how to proceed with Jane.

The doctor referred the family to an inpatient treatment program for alcoholics. The counselors there provided Bill with some coaching about how to introduce the program to Jane, but she refused to participate.

Jane's come-to-Jesus moment occurred much later in the unraveling of her family life. By the time she admitted that she had a drinking problem, her best friend and her husband had bailed on her, were embroiled in an affair, and Bill was filing for divorce. Most of Jane's social relationships were a wreck, and her children were barely speaking to her.

In the end, everyone realized that only Jane could help Jane stop drinking. She had to admit that she had a problem, and take responsibility for "working the program."

In one last ditch effort, Jane's kids (who had engaged a family counselor to help them with an intervention) told Jane that if she ever wanted to see her grandchildren again that she had to give up the booze and go for help. Finally, she did.

Neither of the exes nor Jane were proud of how their relationships came unraveled, but after years of therapy, and participation in 12-step treatment programs, the three have learned to be civil to each other again, and to take responsibility for their own behavior.

Jane now knows that the only way that she was able to stop drinking was to admit that she had a problem, and begin the hard work of addressing the unresolved issues in her past that were triggers for her drinking. For her, in-patient treatment program was an important start. The social workers at the treatment center helped her find a therapist that she could see on an out-patient basis and locate a community-based 12-step program in her neighborhood that she could join. She later found a spiritual director who helped her develop some prayer practices that strengthened her coping skills, and helped her process some of the deep grief that she was now feeling as a result of her failed marriage and damaged friendships relationships.

Eventually, Jane's addiction no longer had power over her—or as she and many in the 12-step movement would say—she admitted that she was powerless over her addiction, and that she needed to stay grounded in a Higher Power in order to get and stay sober.

IV

You've heard Jorge's story and Jane's story. Now back to the Johannine story in today's gospel reading. According to John, Jesus' trial before Pilate went like this:

...Pilate entered the headquarters again, [after Caiaphas, the High Priest, had passed Jesus off to him, and Pilate] summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

The Johannine community, as John recalls, faced a similar challenge to the challenges that Jesus faced. They had to decide whether to align their loyalties with religious and political authorities of their day, or whether they would claim allegiance with a higher power and citizenship in a kingdom other than the one governed by Rome.

V

Our lives in some ways may seem far removed from the lives of John's community, and yet, we all at some point in our lives must decide what gods we will worship and what kind of world we want to live in. So we—like John's community, like Caiaphas and Pilate, and like Jorge and Jane—must choose whether to worship the principalities and powers of this world, or our High Power, which is God. We, like them, must decide what kind of kingdom we will be part of and what kind of world we will create for our own and the next generation.

I wonder, "Will we say 'yes' to some lesser god or 'yes to our Higher Power?" Will we resign ourselves to citizenship in a kingdom governed by the principalities and powers of these lesser Gods, or will we live into the vision of the one whom John called, "The way, the truth, and the life"?

Like John, Jorge and Jane, we are blessed at Eden Church to be part of a community that can help us focus on actions and relationships that reflect Christ's vision of a kingdom not of this world. Like John, Jorge, and Jane, we may live in very different worlds from each other, and yet we can come together here at Eden and affirm our

shared values and common vision that are grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus, and enjoy the blessings of this more excellent way. Thanks be to God. Amen.