

## BYSTANDERS

A bystander is someone who watches – who looks on – a spectator. A bystander is the person who sits by the parade and watches the floats and the bands and the little Kiwanis cars buzzing around, but who does not walk in the middle of the street and participate. A bystander is the person who slows his car down at an accident so that he can get a closer look at wreckage without necessarily stepping in to help the person who was injured. He is the person who turns on the TV to get the lurid details of a shooter or explosion, but has no intention of helping provide for victims or to reach out to survivors. In short, a bystander is an inert force. It matters not if he is present or isn't. Remove him from the scene and nothing changes.

On Good Friday, there were a lot of bystanders when it came to the events of the day – a lot of people who were not intimately involved in the details; but who were there watching, listening, taking it all in. They weren't shouting for Jesus' crucifixion, but they weren't opposing it. They weren't driving the nails into His hands and feet, but they weren't so outraged by it that they refused to watch. They may have been there on Sunday, when Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem attracted crowds and crowds of those who were excited to see a rising star; but when Jesus' star seemed headed to "crash and burn," they also were there to bear witness to His downfall.

You know these folks. They are watchers. They are gawkers. They don't take sides, because they're afraid they might choose poorly. They don't take a stand because they're afraid that taking a stand might come back to haunt them. They want to be well-liked – so they don't want to rock the boat. And so, regarding Jesus: if He is a fraud and phony, they want to be able to say, "I saw that coming. I was never fooled by that pretender!" But if He is the Messiah, they want to be able to say, "Yea, I supported Him. I was one of those who opposed those religious leaders and stood by His side when the chips were down" – even though they didn't. These folks are like the kicker on a football team, who puts up his finger before he kicks so that he can sense the direction of the wind. They want to sense the prevailing current of thinking and jump on the bandwagon when the jumping is good.

Sometimes countries have been like this in war. They want to be neutral because they want to stay out of conflict. They don't want to be invaded. They don't want to take a stand.

But sometimes it's necessary and important to stake your claim – to place your wager on something that matters, no matter where the chips fall. Sometimes being moral – being faithful – being connected to God requires taking a stand and taking a side.

On this day, Good Friday, we see the contrast between Jesus, and one who wants to be a bystander. His name is Pontius Pilate, and, while he is the Roman Governor in charge of Judea and stands tall and powerful; nevertheless, he had been in a bit of hot water with Caesar and feared that any uprising among the Jews might cost him his position. So crucifying an innocent man might be troublesome – but also making enemies of the religious leaders might have even more devastating consequences for him.

So Pilate does what he can to try and stay neutral – to try and not be faced with this difficult and deadly alternative.

So, according to our text, first he tries pulling out an old rule that would make him seem compassionate. He offers them what he thought was an easy way to save Jesus and for them to save face: “During the feast, I will release for you a prisoner. How about I give you a choice, the notorious Barabbas, or Jesus? Which do you want?”

But it doesn't work. They choose Barabbas. In the other Gospels we learn that Pilate had other tactics to try and avoid taking a stand. He tried passing Jesus off to another leader – who had Jewish background – Herod, who happened to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. But turns out, Herod wasn't interested in taking a stand either. He tries to get Jesus to perform a miracle, and when He won't, he send Him right back to Pilate. Pilate continues trying to be a bystander by having Jesus severely flogged and then brought, as a bloody mess, before the crowd. But they continue to shout out, “Crucify Him.”

Pilate, we learn, continues to try and set Jesus free, but every time he does and every plan he hatches is met with the Jewish leaders response: “If you let this man go, you are not friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

And so, in the end, Pilate reluctantly agrees to give them the decree calling for Jesus' crucifixion. But before He does, he figuratively brings a basin of water and washes his hands before the Jerusalem crowd. “I am innocent of this man's blood,” he proclaims.

But hardly is he innocent. Pilate gave in to his fear, did what he knew was wrong, and silently, quietly stood off to the side considering himself innocent, while Jesus' life was cut off.

In contrast, there is Jesus. And please notice how different He is. While Pilate is scrambling, Jesus does nothing to defend Himself. While Pilate is washing his hands, Jesus is setting His face toward the cross.

Jesus had the choice to be a bystander. He could've looked on from the heavenly realms while Satan had his way with the people God created. He could've said to Himself, at a distance, "well, this is what they created for themselves. They made their bed, now let them sleep in it."

But Love is not a bystander, and God is love. And so, God staked His claim with His people by dispatching Jesus to be the victim instead of us – to bear our guilt and our evil and our sins on His own body on the tree, so that they might be done away with.

And that, my friends, is the farthest thing from a bystander. That is a God who is absolutely 100% committed to us, absolutely 100% determined to do everything He can to rescue.

And we are the beneficiaries – heirs of the promise, heirs of His grace, heirs of His love. Cause Jesus staked His claim with us.

And that's the kind of people He wants to make us too. Not neutral bystanders who lift our finger to test the prevailing winds, but people who are ready to do all in our power to keep the Gospel on the move – to share God's love with passion and zeal.

For those of you who, on Monday, went to the movie "Tortured for Christ," you know that Pastor Richard Wurmbrand was not a bystander when it came to following Jesus. Having embraced the Savior as a teen and having learned of the eternal value of being in the camp with the King of Kings, Richard was determined that he was not going to walk the road of so many others by manipulating the truths of Scripture to harmonize with Communism – a harmonizing that ultimately left the Gospel without its main message.

His reward for faithfulness was fourteen years of prison – fourteen years of torture. Three full years in solitary confinement. The horrors he faced seem almost unspeakable.

But Richard knew that his role was to show the love and power of Christ to the other prisoners and to his captors – whatever the cost. And so, empowered by the Holy Spirit in supernatural ways, he gritted his teeth and went on. And all the guards could do is marvel as his willingness to face pain and suffering for something – SOMEONE – who was worth it.

And that's our calling too, brothers and sisters. Maybe not necessarily to suffer the kinds of trials that Richard did; but to never be a bystander when it comes to proclaiming or helping others to proclaim the Gospel message not only to the people that already know it, but also to those whose hearts seem hard, whose way seems lost, whose hearts border on hardness but who may yet have an entry point if they see the love of Christ in all its glory.

Today my prayer is the God would give me courage and boldness to hold up His name as the source of my hope and joy. May God bless you, also, in the same way, or, as Jesus Himself says, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see the good that you do and glorify your Father in heaven."

God grant it to you for Jesus sake. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.