Have you ever know someone who has flip-flopped on a position? Maybe it is your parents, who have always been very frugal, then suddenly splurge on a trip to Europe. Sometimes those unexpected reverses can throw us for a loop. But that is nothing compared to someone who contradicts everything he or she has ever stood for just because it is advantageous to do so. A politician, who has opposed raising taxes and had a reputation as a tax cutter, suddenly comes out with a plan to raise taxes because that is the way the political wind’s blowing. But now he figures the only way to win an election is to argue for the things he has always been against. Of course, his opponent won’t be shy to point out the irony of his flip-flop. Tonight, we have before us that kind of flip-flop and once again, the Jewish leadership was the source of tonight’s irony of Jesus’ passion: WE HAVE NO KING BUT CAESAR.

These words were the final argument in a dispute between Pilate and the Jewish chief priests. With these words, the priests won, or so they thought. We have no king but Caesar. These words ended Pilate’s hope of setting Jesus free.

This argument began early that morning when the Jewish leadership showed up at Pilate’s palace to persuade him to carry out the death sentence they had passed on Jesus a few hours before. But Pilate was not going to let them dictate whom he executed in the name of the Roman Empire. So he questioned Jesus personally. It did not take him very long to figure out that Jesus was guilty of nothing except making these guys jealous. Pilate held the real power in Jerusalem. He was supported by Roman troops and Roman law. The Jewish leaders had to argue with and manipulate Pilate because they did not have the legal authority to execute Jesus.

So these two forces squared off, almost as if Christ had no say in the matter. Pilate was a Roman, a Gentile. At best, he had only a surface knowledge of Jewish religion and he probably did not care to know any more than that. Pilate was loyal to Rome. He was there to enforce Roman law, collect Roman taxes and protect Roman borders. The only opinion that mattered to him was what people in Rome thought.

At heart, Pilate was a cynic. He did not believe in truth. The chief priests were different in almost every way. They hated the Romans. They considered all Gentiles to be unclean, almost subhuman. They could not have cared less about the survival of the Roman Empire. Given a chance, they would have set up shop as an independent country in a heartbeat. Their lives revolved around the hair-splitting controversies of the Jewish sects. However, they were all convinced that the God of Israel was the one true God.

Jesus, of course, was a Jew, but the Jewish religious leaders wanted him dead. They did not care whether he was guilty or not. They were even willing to invent charges just to get rid of him. But the gentile governor - the representative of the occupying army, the man who said, What is truth? - that was the man who wanted justice for Jesus.

So, again and again, Pilate tried to find a way to set him free. He remembered the custom of releasing a prisoner for the Passover and offered Jesus to the crowd. He even had him flogged and then brought back out in hopes that the crowd would feel sorry for him. He sent him to Herod to pass the buck. He argued with the priests and the Jewish mob in front of the palace.

But in the end, he could not escape from the logic of their argument: Jesus claimed to be a king. That meant he was in rebellion against Caesar. If Pilate freed him, Pilate would be taking the enemy’s side. Jesus had to be crucified. It was the Roman way. That forced Pilate to put him on trial publicly. When Pilate asked, Shall I crucify your king?
chief priests answered, **We have no king but Caesar.** With that stunning answer, Pilate sent Jesus to die.

The only way Pilate could have resisted this drive to murder Jesus would have been if he himself was willing to risk everything for Christ. His career, his very life, was on the line once the chief priests invoked Caesar. In the end, Pilate would not risk anything to save an innocent man. Isn’t that human nature? Take care of yourself first. That is, in fact, the difference between Jesus and everyone else in this story. Jesus alone was willing to lay down his life for the good of others.

Are we any different from Pilate? If we imagine ourselves in his place, we often think that we would have stood up to the Jewish leaders, even if it meant they would have run all the way to Rome to tattle on us. But would we? The truth is, most of us probably will not ever find ourselves in a situation quite this dramatic. Rather, every day we have the opportunity to sacrifice our lives for God in the love we show to one another. When you look at our real lives, are we any more willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others than Pilate was? Sacrificing ourselves for others is the core of real Christian love. Are we willing to sacrifice everything for God? For the truth? For the good of people who do not deserve it and who would never make such a sacrifice for us? To be faithful to God we have to accept the smirks and the dislike of people who do not want to be too fanatical about their faith. We have to stand on God’s principles, instead of standing on convenience. Do we do that?

No, we usually try to save our own skins, just as Pilate did. We tell little white lies that keep us out of trouble. We avoid making eye contact with people who need our help until we are out of range. We wait for the right moment to talk about Jesus, and, strangely, the right moment never seems to come. We act friendly, but we do not really put ourselves out there for our neighbor, and we never really risk anything for the cause of Christ. Does that sound like you?

All those sins and failures, all that lack of love deserves God's punishment in hell. What an irony that Jesus endured this endless debate for people like us. In love, Jesus did endure it. For him, it was one more step to the cross, one more step to dying and rising and setting us free. He could have put a stop to it at any moment. But he did no’t. He played along while these little men argued and debated, knowing how it was going to end. Then he submitted when Pilate lost and he died.

The miracle in all this is that God counts that perfect, self-sacrificing love of Christ as ours. He looks at Jesus and says that you and I have loved God and one another because Jesus did. God counts Jesus’ death as our payment for sin. When Jesus died on that cross, his blood washed away all our selfishness, all the lies we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better, all our guilt for all the times we put ourselves first. Because Jesus suffered our death and our hell, God has forgiven those sins. Through faith in Jesus, we are now free.

In a way, Pilate and the Jewish leaders were like children playing at being adults. They were playing at judging Christ as if it were really up to them to decide whether he went to the cross. Only they did not know it was a game. That is the irony of the passion. **We have no king but Caesar.** These words are a sad comment on life without faith.

The chief priests hated Caesar. Jerusalem had a reputation for being one of the hardest places in the Roman Empire to rule because the Jews were convinced that they were the people of God and that God would help them if they revolted. **We have no king but Caesar** was a lie they never thought would pass their lips. So why did they say it? It
was a ploy to trap Pilate into doing what they wanted. However, there was a deeper meaning to it. Jesus was the true King of Israel. God had been promising for a thousand years to send a son of King David to rule his people. Jesus was that Son of David, that Messiah. All Jewish hopes focused on him. Abraham had looked forward in faith to the day of Christ and every true son of Abraham trusted in him even in the Old Testament. When these men rejected Jesus and said they had no king but Caesar, they denied the faith of their fathers and removed themselves from the people of God.

In every person’s heart there is a king. There is a Caesar that rules our hopes and dreams. There is something that we steer by and work for. That king is supposed to be Jesus. His Word and his love are supposed to be the end all and be all of our existence. But for most people, the king is something else. Even for us Christians, when we were born, the king was something else. It was us and our pleasure and convenience. Even to this day, the old king of our hearts still wants his job back.

It would not take much for you and me to join these men in denying all that we have confessed and in claiming a false god as our king. No sinner has the strength to remain faithful to Christ on his or her own. The devil is constantly looking for that moment of weakness when he can pull us away from Christ and back into his kingdom. If you don’t believe how easy it could be, find a member of this church who you know used to come faithfully but who has now drifted away. Ask how hard it was to get out of the habit of coming to church. You will be horrified to discover how easy it was.

Have no fear. The same Jesus who could have stopped this farce at any time is in control of our lives too. He has given us faith and he promises he will keep that faith alive. Trust in him. When you see how easy it is to let something else become the driving force in your life, when you fear for your faith, that is when Jesus reminds us that he loves and forgives us. He has given his Word to strengthen us. He has given us baptism and Holy Communion to keep our faith alive. He has given us pastors and teachers to hear your confession and to comfort you with Jesus’ love and forgiveness. He has given you fellow members to encourage you. He has promised: Never will I leave you or forsake you. If you ever doubt his love, look back on that ridiculous day when these little men thought they were doing what they wanted. All along, they were bringing Jesus to the cross so that he could die for you. His blood has washed all your sin and weakness away. He lives in you and will bring you home.

In every person’s life, there is a king. The king in the heart of unbelievers leads them to hell. If they feel good and lucky about the lives they have led, or if they are sad and bitter about how hard it has been, either way they go to hell. But God has given us the one thing Pilate and the chief priests lacked - faith in Christ. So he has put a new King in our hearts. Yes, that King has rivals. All the sin and all the pleasures of this life tempt us, but Jesus is still the King. He reigns through the message of his love. Trust in him and have no other king in your life. Amen.

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