The Notorious Barabbas

Community UMC - 3/17/24

In this season of Easter, I want to take a little different look at the events surrounding Easter. But I want to start with a question – has anyone ever heard of Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman? Nicole Brown’s married name was Nicole Brown Simpson. These were the 2 people who were murdered, and OJ Simpson was charged for their murders. Remember the “Trial of the Century” back in 1994. Do you believe that was 30 years ago? Remember the white Bronco, slow motion police chase on TV? The glove –“If the glove don’t fit, you must acquit.” Or Kato Kaelin – who was that guy? Or Mark Furman, the cop accused of being a racist?

I think we could describe OJ as “notorious”. The definition of notorious is “famous or well-known, typically for some bad quality or deed.” We don’t know for sure if OJ was guilty or not. But in general, we don’t like it when people, who we think did something bad and deserve punishment, get away without being punished. Over the years you might have watched shows like Law and Order, NCIS, even back to Perry Mason, where someone commits a crime, the police find them, and they go to jail – all neatly wrapped up in one hour. We like that sense of fairness and justice. But real life isn’t that neat and clean. Like in the Simpson trial, there are a lot of factors in each individual case that influence whether justice is done.

Things weren’t that different in Bible times. The Bible tells us a great deal about one particular trial and how the justice process was influenced by the political climate and the race relations of the day, and how justice was not done. That was in the trial of Jesus. As we approach Holy Week, we remember, and maybe even reenact, parts of the trial of Jesus. We usually see things from Jesus’ perspective, or maybe Peter’s. But I want to look at that trial from a different perspective – from that of Barabbas.

So, who was Barabbas? In the Gospel of Matthew we learn that Barabbas was “… a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas.”  Mark tells us “Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.” And John, in his gospel, tells us, “Now Barabbas was a bandit.”

I think it is interesting to know what the name “Barabbas” means. It is spelled B A R A B B A S – “Bar” means “son of” and “Abba” means father. And Barabbas’ first name was Jesus – a common name at that time. So Barabbas was “Jesus, son of the father” – interesting play on words there, don’t you think?

So, let’s do a little review on the trial of Jesus of Nazareth before Pilate, who is the Roman governor. I think we’re all pretty familiar with the trial, so I don’t think I’m playing spoiler here. Jesus has been arrested by the Jewish religious police for blasphemy, for the fact that he claimed to be God. He is brought before the high priest, but the Jews had no power to put a man to death. They had to get Jesus to Pilate in order to have him executed, so they charged him with treason, saying He claimed to be king, which was a direct threat to Caesar. Pilate had no interest in dealing with Jesus. The only reason he dealt with this issue at all was because of the large mob of people that were in front of him, all shouting to crucify Jesus.

I think it’s important to realize that Jesus was a very controversial person for this time. People had strong reactions to him. Some loved him and gave up literally everything to follow him. But some disliked him and his message so much that they plotted to kill him. Think about the political climate today. If I mention Donald Trump, some people love him and some hate him. Likewise, if I mention Joe Biden – I’m not picking sides here! Well Jesus caused those same kinds of extreme emotions in people. Think about the fact that the religious leaders, people who had spent their lives studying God’s word and trying to live righteous lives, were so upset with Jesus, that they were the ones who not only plotted to kill Jesus, but got the job done.

I am struck by how much this scene feels like it could be happening today. Not the part about being arrested by the religious leaders, but the part about extreme emotions, and a mob influencing events and the legal system. Whether it is the riots have happened in many of our cities, or the storming of the Capitol building on January 6th, or protests at the southern border, or marches in Washington… I think we can understand how the threat of violence by a large group of people can affect events and possibly change decisions.

So back to Jesus’ trial, Pilate is facing this mob that wants to have Jesus put to death. Pilate’s wife was warning Pilate to have nothing to do with Jesus, who she called a righteous man. Pilate himself can’t figure out what Jesus has done to make this mob want to kill him. And Pilate is trying to figure out how to keep the peace in Jerusalem – which is his number one job. He doesn’t want to get in trouble with the Romans and lose his position. So he tries to come up with a plan to calm everything down.

There was a custom at the time where the Romans would be gracious to the Jews at Passover time and release a prisoner for them. Pilate thinks that this custom might get him out of this situation. When the crowd comes, he offers to release Jesus, who has done nothing deserving death. He thinks that should settle things down.

But the crowd doesn’t want Jesus released. I assume Pilate would have been surprised and confused. But he needs to figure out a way to keep the peace. Then he remembers Barabbas. I’m guessing he thinks, if I give them a choice between this man (Jesus) who has done nothing deserving of death, and a notorious criminal like Barabbas, they’ll surely pick Jesus to release, and the problem will be solved. But that’s not how it went, right?

I saw a video that gives some more perspective on this choice the people made. I don’t have that video this morning, but let me describe it to you. It starts with asking the question, “Could you for a second imagine choosing Barabbas, a career criminal, over Jesus, a teacher of peace, even if you disagreed with Jesus’ life and philosophy. I mean if you had a choice between Bin Laden and Gandhi, maybe you wouldn’t want to condemn either, but if you had to choose, who here would choose to condemn Gandhi (a man of peace) rather than Bin Laden (a violent terrorist)? … If you had to choose between the Dali Lama and Sadam Hussein, I doubt very seriously that even if you disagree violently with the Dali Lama, that you would choose to execute the Dali Lama rather than Sadam Hussein. … Here’s one a little closer to home for us - If you had to choose between Billy Graham and Charles Manson, even if you despise Christianity, or just thought that Christians were ridiculous, you probably wouldn’t choose to execute Billy Graham over Charles Manson. The idea that this would happen is beyond belief.” But the crowd chose to condemn Jesus, the man of peace, over the notorious criminal and murderer, Barabbas.

I think these comparisons really help us to understand how crazy that decision was. Can you imagine religious leaders thinking they are doing God’s will by killing someone like Billy Graham, and releasing someone like Charles Manson?

So let’s shift our perspective and think about things from Barabbas’ point of view. We know Barabbas was in jail with other rebels. The prison he was in was about 2000 feet away (less than half a mile) from where Pilate was addressing the crowd. He was close enough to the trial that he could probably hear the crowd yelling to Pilate. Maybe he couldn’t hear Pilate’s voice, just the reaction of the crowd. So what would he have heard? Pilate would have asked the people if they wanted him to release Jesus, and they would have responded with grumbles, boos, and “NO”. Scripture says the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas. So from his cell, Barabbas probably hears this mob yelling his name. Then Pilate asks them, “What do you want me to do with this man you call the “King of the Jews”? And the crowd responds, “Crucify him!!!”

So Barabbas, and the men in prison with him, who are condemned for their crimes, may think that the crowd is calling for Barabbas’ crucifixion. The guards then take Barabbas before Pilate. Barabbas would have been expecting to face a long painful death by crucifixion. Imagine the relief Barabbas felt when he was told that he was free to go. That he was released, and that Jesus would be crucified in his place…

The Christian faith talks a lot about Jesus as our savior, and the doctrine of Salvation. I think Barabbas could understand that idea more than anyone. He is a man who really knows what it means to say Jesus died in his place, that Jesus saved his life.

The Bible tells us that we are no better or different than Barabbas. Romans 3:23 tells us that, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” None of us are perfect, we all have sinned, and continue to sin, even if we try not to. Maybe not huge sins like murder, but we all do things we shouldn’t, or don’t do things we should. James 4:17 says that “the one who knows the right thing to do but doesn’t do it, sins.” And Romans 6:23 tells us what our punishment for sinning is, it says, “For the wages of sin is death.” As sinners, we are all under a death sentence. And Jesus alone has the power to save us as he saved Barabbas. That’s why he came to earth – to save sinners.

We don’t know if Barabbas ever became a believer – he isn’t mentioned again in the Bible after the trial of Jesus. He may have just been thankful that he escaped punishment. But escaping punishment isn’t what he needed. It may be what he wanted. But escaping punishment is temporary.

Jesus took on himself the sins of the whole world, and He died for each of us. But the story of Jesus doesn’t end on Good Friday, does it? We are Easter people! Soon we will celebrate Easter and the fact that Jesus was resurrected and came back to life, proving his deity and his power over death. That is what saves us. And that salvation is not temporary.

I read the first half of Romans 6:23, and here’s the whole verse, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” But to get that gift of eternal life, we have to decide if we will accept Jesus’ gift. John 1:12 says, “To all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.” We have to receive and accept Jesus’ gift of salvation.

So, I leave you with a challenge – think about the people in that mob who chose to release Barabbas instead of Jesus. Think about making a life and death decision like that, because like those people, each of us has a life and death choice to make, but it is for our own eternal life.