

November 25, 2018: Christ the King Sunday
John 18:33-37
Hard Stuff
Michael Stanfield

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ 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?” ³⁶ 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.” ³⁷ 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.” ³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Lord God, bless these ancient words on the page that they may give testimony to your living word that connects us to you. We pray in Christ’s name, amen.

Sports writers at USA Today put their heads together to list what, in their opinion, were the 10 hardest things to do in sports. They were, in order, beginning with # 10:

10. Skiing the alpine downhill race at 80 mph.
9. Saving a penalty kick in soccer.
8. Bicycling the Tour de France covering 2,114 miles.
7. Running a marathon.
6. Landing a quadruple toe loop on figure skates — with grace.
5. Returning a 130-140 mph tennis serve.
4. Hitting a golf ball straight and long – with consistency.
3. Pole vaulting.
2. Driving a race car while enduring 5 G’s in the corners in 120 degree heat, knowing a mistake can kill you.

And # 1, # 1, they said was hitting a major-league baseball pitch thrown at 90 plus mph. If you can pull that off successfully just three out of 10 times you’ll land a multimillion dollar contract.

Retired Yale University physics professor Robert Adair explained the level of difficulty. Adair is the author of the book, “The Physics of Baseball.” In the article, he said, “Players like Ted Williams, Barry Bonds and Mookie Betts are absolutely extraordinary athletes and can do things that other people can’t. What’s remarkable about them is not their muscles or anything like that. It’s in their brains. Their brains really work better than yours and mine at this.”

A fastball thrown at 95 to 100 mph reaches home plate in about four-tenths of a second. In the blink of an eye, you have to swing the bat to exactly the right spot at exactly the right time. Adair says that when a fastball-thrower hurls a pitch in the high 90s, the hitter has only about two-tenths of a second from the time the ball leaves his hand to process “the last information that does you any conceivable good whatsoever” — and then swing. “After two-tenths of a second, they can turn out the lights in the stadium,” Adair says, “and it won’t affect how they hit at all.”

He goes on to say that, “If a person from another planet was told what’s involved ... he would say it was impossible.”

Sports feats at the professional level are difficult. No doubt. They take endurance, skill, training and talent, but ultimately, in the grand scheme of the universe they aren’t really all that important. At the end of the day they don’t matter. After all, athletic competitions – even the world championships – are just games. Life itself is considerably harder and much more challenging.

So what’s the hardest thing to do in life? Here’s my list of life’s 10 most challenging events – events that require daring, hope, talent and skill. Keep in mind that what is number 10 for me may be number one for someone else. We all have our own personal challenges that would make our list look different, but here, in my Thirty years of ministry, is my list of the hardest things to do:

10. Live homeless and hungry.
9. Live with chronic debilitating illnesses – especially Alzheimer’s.
8. Be diagnosed with a terminal illness or have a loved one who is.
7. Find a significant unshakeable connection with one’s life partner once trust has been broken by infidelity.
6. Get sober when you are an addict.
5. Recover from the scars of physical and/or emotional trauma.
4. Love your enemy – these days especially those who are on the opposite end of the political spectrum as you.
3. Maintain a conscious connection to God amidst the inner and outer trials and tribulations of life.
2. Bury a child.
1. Remove hospital life support from a loved one –especially if that loved one is a child.

In my opinion, this list makes the complicated judgments involved in skiing at 80 mph, pole vaulting, and hitting a baseball look easy.

The life list is a tough list, because it involves matters of life and death. Top world athletes, even on their hardest days, rarely, if ever, make that kind of choice. And fortunately most of us are not forced to deal with such stuff on a daily basis.

But it was exactly the kind of stuff first Century Roman Governors had to deal with all the time.

Thumbs up, or thumbs down.

This was part and parcel of the job description of Pontius Pilate. As Governor of the Province of Judea for Rome he was always making serious choices. And in spite of the fact that we know Pilate’s administration to have been corrupt and cruel, John shows him to be very human. In fact, John paints a rather sympathetic picture of Pilate – one of a man as troubled in difficult situations as we are –trying to resist certain pressures, listen to his spouse, have courage, recognize the reality of the situation, then make a choice.

And history tells us that Pilate did this very thing quite well, albeit rather ruthlessly, for nearly 11 years. It was his slaughtering of those involved in the Samaritan Uprising in the year 36 that was his final undoing. The result was that he was exiled to Gaul in shame and disgrace, where at the ripe old age of 38 he committed suicide.

Pilate's job was to keep the peace. He did this mainly by strong-arming crowds away from mob violence, sometimes even sending soldiers disguised as peasants into the crowd with daggers to assassinate the rabble rousers. But this story of the trial of Jesus is different. Even for Pilate the right thing to do seems unclear. Jesus has even someone as powerful and self-serving as Pilate questioning his *raison d'être* as primary officer of the peace.

And this story clearly tells us that keeping the peace at all costs is the wrong thing to do. Sometimes doing the most moral thing upsets the peace. Sometimes peace, as the world defines it, is the wrong choice. Although harder, sometimes it's better to take a risk on upsetting the peace. Sometimes we need to stick our necks out; sometimes standing up for what we really believe in at the risk of rocking the boat is important. It may in fact turn out to be the very thing we were called to do.

Apologizing or forgiving too quickly without acknowledging the hurt and resultant breach of trust and working through that hard stuff cheapens rather honors relationships.

Remaining quiet in a meeting when we feel something is off, keeps the peace but it may also be sabotaging both the process and the outcome of the work of a group. To be whole, every voice must be heard, respected and responded to – otherwise both the process and the outcome will be anything but peaceful and will likely be the cause of even more brokenness.

At what cost do we, like Pilate maintain the peace — at home, at work or at play? Let's take a look.

It was just another workday for Pilate when Jesus showed up. One can imagine Pilate being just about ready to relax. After all, the busy week of Passover was just about to come to an end. He dreaded this week every year. The throngs of people would come in from all over the known world and there was always the threat of an uprising. But so far, so good; he is about to breathe a sigh of relief. Then word comes to him just as he is about to have a night cap and go off to bed...

The Jews have captured a man who they say claims to be a King higher than Caesar. The crowd is in an uproar. Practically knocking over his drink, he jumps up and heads to his courtroom chambers to see this criminal who has been brought to his court. Trying to remain calm, I imagine him telling himself:

"It's just another day of the week to keep the peace and to keep my post. Just another life to judge. Ask questions, listen, weigh the evidence, then decide. Live or die. You can do this – just as you have done it so well so many times before."

And so, he takes a deep breath and enters the room.

I then imagine the governor rolling his eyes at the irony of the circumstances — a captured,

bound man accused of claiming kingship. A powerless peasant, really. An unarmed Jew from the underclass. But Pilate proceeds. “Are you a king?”

It’s a question he probably was not asking seriously. He probably did not take the matter of Christ’s kingship as seriously as the religious authorities in Jerusalem or as soberly as we do on this Christ the King Sunday. He was just doing his duty. Because on the face of it, Pilate felt it to be a preposterous question. Obviously, to Pilate, Jesus was not a king. He had no army. He had no city. He had no funding. No robes. No weapons. He had *nothing*. To Pilate, he *was* nothing.

But Jesus responds to Pilate’s question with an unexpected question of his own.

(How often are we faced with unexpected, hard questions in our lives when facing terrible or tricky choices?)

“Governor,” says Jesus, “why ask your question? Do you think I am a king, or were you told I am a king?”

Pilate must have wondered, “Is this stupidity, insolence or strength?” But he plays the situation with humor and skill — it is, after all, somewhat of a game to him. With slight irritation and perhaps a smirk, he replies, “How should I know? Am I one of your people? *Your* people, *your* leaders – *they* brought you here to me.” Then, getting to the serious point, he finally asks, “What have you done?”

And I would guess that the expectation of the most powerful man in Judea, the representative of Emperor Tiberius himself, is that Jesus will answer directly. But Jesus does not.

Instead he replies that he is a king, the King of ‘Truth’ but from another world. “Ahhhh,” Pilate says to himself. “King of Truth. From another world. Hmmm. A game *is* afoot. This amusing man is harmless.”

So Pilate displays some sportsmanship. Jesus is no threat. Whether this man lives or dies (or so Pilate believes) is of no consequence. The peace will easily be kept tonight. There’s no justification for killing him. It will be an easy choice. Yet at the end of this little interview, Pilate asks Jesus what could have been a very difficult question indeed: “What is truth?”

However, for Pilate it’s not a serious question. It’s an unimportant and dismissive question. It’s a rhetorical question because, Pilate, like all petty despots, knows that the truth is what he says it is regardless of the facts. What is Truth? Pilate’s truth is that he does whatever is necessary to keep the peace and keep his power.

But the irony is that this off-handed question said half consciously by Pilate is at the very heart – not only of the matter at hand – but of the Gospel itself. And it is not lost on this preacher that it has also become the heart of what is going on at the highest levels of our own government today...

But for Pilate, as it turned out, the gig was up. Because now, suddenly, he had the God's Truth standing right in front of him and could not see it. He was so distracted by playing the game of keeping his post and keeping the peace that he missed it. He loses his footing, he drops the ball, he strikes out — because in making the wrong choice about Jesus, he loses not only the power he had in this world, he loses any potential power that is associated with the world Jesus is talking about.

For Jesus, the gospel tells us, *is* the Way, the Truth and the Life. That's what Pilate missed in his playing games with the truth. It may be that we, too, miss this truth when our political affiliations take the place of God. When that happens, the Truth becomes as it was for Pilate, little more than a pawn in today's power games. We thus are unable to see the Christ who is standing right there beside us, within us, and among us as plain as day.

It *is* in the hard places, the hard decisions in our lives that we must ask the tough questions while seeking divine truth. Then we should listen to the answers, weigh the evidence, judge and act — or maybe, just maybe, not act at all. Sometimes when we are being forced one way or the other and we know that neither way is right, we stand firm at that place of tension right in the middle — the only place that holds a space for those on both sides. Regardless of what we decide, unlike Pilate, we need to let our choices be truth-seeking, not game-playing and ego-saving.

In the end, Pilate gave Jesus over to the whims of the furious crowd. He did the politically expedient thing. He kept the peace and he more than likely *did* prevent a riot — but only for that one night. He believed he had done the right thing. And that's where Pilate and the rest of us are similar. When we are presented with life's difficult choices we may choose to be expedient rather than do what is ultimately right. Making the right choice these days usually isn't easy or popular.

So what's the hardest thing for you? Is it learning to forgive when you are hurt? Loving our enemies, both personal and national? Having courage and faith in the face of a child's death? Working through your own trauma or that of a loved with? Acts like these take hope and courage and are more challenging than any game we may be playing with the Truth.

But we have to face it. No doubt about it. That's what life is all about. And the Good news is that God's Truth incarnate is with us — just like he was even with Pilate.

Sooner or later, each of us must step into the batter's box. And it is there that we are called on to decide the truth: whether the fastballs we receive deserve a swing on our part or are ones we best just let go. Whether we choose rightly will be determined by whether we recognize and consult the Truth incarnate who is standing just behind the plate.

Let us pray. Gracious Lord, when faced with difficult choices, help us to do the right thing, even if it is no thing, rather than the expedient thing, as hard as that may be, with the knowledge that, come what may, you, the King of Truth are with us. And now bless these gifts so that more may be exposed to that selfsame Truth are enabled to recognize it when it comes. We pray this in the name of Christ, Amen.