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After spending a week home sick, I lost track of time as one day blurred into another and as I moved from sleep to fatigue and back to more sleep. When my mind finally cleared and I began to prepare for this morning, I had hoped for an uplifting scripture—something filled with happiness and joy. We often long for that in the middle of Lent, this time of year when we look forward to more sunshine and less coldness. We're tired of the struggle, wanting spring and Easter to arrive, hoping for the radiance of warmth and light. As I read the scripture this week, I instead discovered that rather than happiness and joy, the story continued the conversation with the Roman governor Pilate, an uncomfortable dialogue that began last Sunday.

Last week Pilate struggled with the meaning of truth, asking Jesus if he were a king. Pilate told the crowd he could find no wrong with Jesus, and this week Pilate's words seem to echo his desire to not decide, suggesting again to the crowd that he could

find no wrong. Pilate seemed unable to decide what to do with Jesus.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which you just couldn't decide what to do? By avoiding deciding, we sometimes create the illusion that we're not responsible, that someone else can decide. At other times, we may need help in deciding, as was the case with a judge who needed others to help decide the fate of someone brought into his courtroom. It was a small county in the middle of nowhere, and juries were hard to pull together.

After listening to the man for several minutes, the judge could see that the man was clearly guilty. There were a couple of problems, though. The man demanded a jury trial, and it was getting late into the afternoon. The judge glanced at his watch and thought he might still get this case over with before the end of the day.

The judge called for a recess and walked out into the hallway of the court. He saw a

group of lawyers there who were finished with their cases and were preparing to leave. He asked them if they would like to serve on a jury for a short case.

This was an opportunity for the lawyers to act in an entirely different way, so they all enthusiastically agreed to serve on the jury. In just a few minutes court was convened, the case was heard, and the lawyer jury was dismissed to consider the case.

After more than an hour, the judge was confused at the length of the jurors' deliberations. He sent his bailiff to see what was delaying the jury. The bailiff returned. The judge asked the bailiff what was taking the jury so long to reach a decision.

"Reach a decision?" the bailiff responded. "They haven't even finished their nominating speeches for foreman of the jury."¹

Sometimes it's so easy to put off our decisions—even a decision to do the right thing. Pilate couldn't decide what to do with Jesus, so he

tried to remove his responsibility by asking the crowd. The crowd then uttered words that seemed to terrify Pilate, for they said, "He claims to be the Son of God." Could it be that Pilate finally grasped the significance of this moment in history, that he's dealing with more than an ordinary guy falsely accused of a crime? Could he somehow sense that God was part of the trial, for he asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" Jesus remained silent, knowing he had already explained that his kingdom was not of this world.

I wonder what it would have been like to be part of the crowd when Pilate asked for input into the decision. Standing on this side of history the answer seems obvious, but just imagine how numerous opinions might have existed about this man Jesus. Was he a teacher and healer, or was he one who created trouble by arguing with authorities and stirring up restlessness? Did he bring hope and peace, or did he inspire revolt and change?

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Try to imagine what went through the minds of those in the crowd. Imagine you were part of the conversation:

Crowd member 1: I'm not sure why we are here this morning.

Crowd member 2: You know why—to tell the story about what happened to Jesus, the day we were part of the crowd when...

1: I know what happened. I just don't think it's a story these people want to hear. Jesus suffered a great deal. Why would they want to hear about that day when Jesus was captured and we stood in the crowd? We didn't do anything to stop what happened.

2: We could *not* have stopped it. It was out of our control.

1: Yeah, but you went along with it. You dragged me along since you heard Jesus was arrested, and I think you were eager to see something happen to him.

2: I was just curious.

1: No, you were against Jesus. You didn't like what he stood for. You wanted him on trial.

2: I was undecided. I wasn't sure.

1: I had heard him teaching the crowds. I had seen him heal people, but all you did was listen to the false stories being spread about him.

2: I had heard he wanted to overthrow the government, and although I didn't like everything the Romans did, at least they kept some control and order. I heard that a Zealot was one of Jesus' followers, and the Zealots wanted to overthrow the government with force. I didn't want the chaos that would occur.

1: Jesus didn't want a violent overthrow. He said the peacemakers would inherit the earth, not the violent rulers.

2: So why did Pilate have him arrested? Why did he flog him if Jesus wasn't a rebel? Why did Pilate put a crown of thorns on his head and dress him in a purple robe to indicate he was a king?

1: Pilate was mocking Jesus. Trying to stir up the emotions of the crowd by creating a show.

2: Well, he did a good job of that, for I couldn't believe how quickly the crowd began yelling "Crucify him."

1: Even you joined the chanting!

2: I got caught up in the moment. I'm embarrassed now that I joined the yelling of the crowd, but it was just such an intense moment. I don't know what came over me, what happened to me.

1: You weren't thinking. That's what happened to you.

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2: I hadn't met Jesus like you had. I hadn't learned anything from him. I only heard rumors about him. And to my defense, even Pilate wasn't sure what to do with him. Pilate even offered to release Jesus since he found no case against him.

1: He was playing mind tricks, for he had him dressed like a mock king. It was all a show for Pilate, which is part of what stirred up the crowd. Maybe if I had said something to counteract the voices of the crowd, maybe enough people would have joined my voice and stopped all the nonsense.

2: I doubt that would have done any good. Besides, you know what his disciples said happened

when they discovered that empty tomb a few days later.

1: I know. But I still feel terrible about all the suffering that Jesus faced, and I stood there and watched it begin to happen.

2: Don't you remember what you always told me Jesus taught: God's love offers everyone another chance. You told me that Jesus said something about forgiving one another 70 x 7—meaning a whole bunch of times.

1: Maybe you *did* learn something from Jesus after all.

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¹ Hodgins, Michael; Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3517-3527). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. #530.