

**Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**March 18, 2018**

*John 19:1-16a*

One of my favorite ways to open conversation with our church's youth is through a game we call "Forced Choice". The idea is to pose to them a question in which they must choose between one extreme and the other. It gives us a chance to hear where their reasoning lies and what their faith has to say about it.

During one of our very early confirmation classes, as we were trying to get us all knowing one another, Debi and I asked them an innocuous question about their future selves. "When you become an adult and are out on your own, would you rather have a pet dog or a pet cat? If dog, stand at the fireplace. If cat, stand at the table." As expected, about half the room went one way, and the other half went the other.

My unofficial statistics on the question are that this is usually the way it happens. We then ask Team Cat to explain their reasoning and Team Dog to explain theirs. Sometimes, based on what their peers say, the confirmands will switch sides as they come to understand new information.

Now, the only rule that we try to stick to is that to play this game they must make a choice. There is no in between, no grey area, no standing in the middle. Most years there is at least one young person in the crowd who challenges us on having to make a choice in the first place, that's expected, and we roll with it.

Last night, we played forced choice for the second time, but our theme was on evil (and the Christian response to it). The final question I asked them was this *"Would you rather be Hitler, or be one of the people who was led to the gas chamber?"*

It's a question that ALWAYS leads to a fascinating discussion. "If we choose Hitler, can we change the path he went down?" one bright student asked. "No, you can only be the historical Hitler." My money is that the youth who asked that question is either going to be a lawyer or maybe a pastor. Ultimately, the members of the class were unanimous in their choice, you can probably guess what it was.

I tell you this story because, as we continue hearing John's version of Jesus' trial before Pilate, I've been wondering if Jesus did, indeed, have any choice in the matter.

Over his three year ministry, Jesus chose to take what Robert Frost called "the path less travelled". The choices he made were often risky. And in the big scheme of things, what did his actions achieve? Think about it...

The people he healed from diseases sooner or later became ill again or grew old and died. The people in the crowd whom Jesus gave bread and fish to eat, what lasting good was it to them? They became hungry again the very next day. The profiteers he drove out of the temple? They just returned the next day to continue exploiting the poor. The Roman authority was never truly shaken from their seat of power like a messiah was supposed to do. The centralized religious system in which he was raised remained unchanged, despite his criticism.

There was, in fact, a moment when Jesus could have made a "real" difference, a moment when maybe everything might have been different.

That day he rode into the royal city of Jerusalem, the city of the great king David, and was royally hailed and hosanna-ed by the crowds as the one who would change *everything*, at least for the Jews who suffered under the Romans, but maybe for the whole world too.

On that day, the power to overthrow the oppressor was his. The power to deliver his people from bondage was his. The power to bring about a just social and economic system was his. Jesus had only to take control of the reins, and steer them all towards the glorious goal for which they all yearned.

But he didn't. Not even close! No sooner was Jesus crowned the Coming Great Messiah by a massive upsurge, then he began to do everything he should *not* have done.

Reading slowly through John as we have this year makes me wonder if he set himself up. We pondered in Bible study what it might have looked like if he had chosen otherwise. Jesus seems to have just handed himself over to the powers; he seems to have given up control to those who really should not have it... and I'm ahead of myself because next week is Palm Sunday.

Back to the arrest and trial... in the *real world*, in the *big scheme of things*, in terms of bringing about health and welfare and justice and peace for all, it seems as if Jesus' mediocre messianic mission will indeed come to a miserable end.

Jesus, in the Gospel of John, has a way of making the other characters in the narrative expose their truth. The encounter alone seems to disclose the truth about whoever he is encountering.

What is done in mockery reveals the truth. Pilate, with pretensions of power and authority, shows his true self as someone who is powerless and weak. The Temple Priests are made to admit that Caesar is their king, and not God. The crown of thorns and the purple robe and the wooden scepter that the soldiers dress Jesus up in make him look strangely and truly royal.

Jesus faces the governing authority as an equal, or more than an equal, and put the governor's questions right back to him. He claims to possess an authority and sovereignty in himself which the real-world governor seems to know nothing about – an authority which is not established and maintained by swords and guns and tanks and bombs but by love of God, love of self, and love of neighbor.

This governor, this Pilate, represents the only power and sovereignty that matters in the real world of economics and politics and law. His is the supreme power to control history and its outcomes. In Pilate is the power to decide who gets bread and who doesn't, the power to bind and free, the power to determine who lives and who dies. Pilate himself declares to Jesus, *"Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"*

My mother has a coffee mug that I notice every time I visit, it's inscribed with, "I'm a Special Ed Teacher—what's your superpower?" I chuckle each time I see it but only because my mother really is a force, a power, to be reckoned with (even now that she is retired).

The mug reminds me that we all have power—we all produce an effect, we all have some control or influence over someone. Some of us even possess physical might.

As parents, spouses, children, grandparents, aunts and uncles, members of the community, neighbors, employees, employers, managers, workers, voters, teachers, students, police officers, soldiers, politicians, pastors —

every one of us has a place of power with respect to others. How do we choose to use that power?

As we come to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry I cannot help but think of the beginning of his ministry—his baptism and journey through the wilderness. At the end of those 40 days, Jesus was confronted with both the devil's power and his own power. The devil revealed (or claimed) his power to hand over the worldly kingdoms to Jesus. The devil also recognized Jesus' power to turn stones to bread, to escape death and make a big scene...and his power to set up the devil as a god (one to be worshiped.) But, as we have mentioned many times, Jesus did NOT use his power to serve himself.

As we follow Jesus through his ministry, we hear about him using his power to heal the sick and give sight to the blind. He uses the power of story (parable) to reveal the kingdom. He uses his social power to welcome the outcasts like Zacchaeus and the Samaritan Woman. He uses his power to forgive the broken. And, here before Pilate, his choice is to not use his power to effect a different outcome because his superpower is peace and love.

What is your superpower? Where do you have power in your life...and over whom do you have power? Most importantly, how are you using your power?

*We already know what it is to have Pilate's power. We are capable of granting freedom to others or crucifying them. We have the power to bully and abuse to keep someone in check; we are capable of maiming someone weaker than us, either physically or emotionally; we are capable of robbing others of their self-esteem, self-worth and integrity; we can even crucify someone else's hopes, plans or dreams.*

But we also have the power to protect and serve; to heal; to build others up, to strengthen their self-esteem; to feed their hopes and dreams.

God has given you power. How will you use it? Will we bow to the pressures of the world or give in to the desires of self? Or, will we use our God-given power to bring life and hope and joy to the world around us? Will we use our power to effect good in the lives of others? Will we use our influence, wealth, voices and strength to only better our own position in life. Or will we—like Jesus—use our power to bring life to others?