

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ²And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³They kept coming up to him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ and striking him on the face. ⁴Pilate went out again and said to them, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.’ ⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Here is the man!’ ⁶When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.’ ⁷The Jews answered him, ‘We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.’

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’ But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰Pilate therefore said to him, ‘Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?’ ¹¹Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.’ ¹²From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.’

¹³ When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge’s bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. ¹⁴Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, ‘Here is your King!’ ¹⁵They cried out, ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’ Pilate asked them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but the emperor.’ ¹⁶Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

This last week I attended the NEXT Church national gathering in Minneapolis. NEXT church describes itself as “a network of leaders across the Presbyterian Church USA who believe the ‘church that is becoming’ is a church that is faithful, fruitful, diverse and engaged in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in a changing world”. They are trying to do this in a few key ways. By fostering dynamic, diverse congregations who are engaged in mission and new models of ministry; encouraging, connecting and developing visionary leaders who want to be leaders of change; incubating strategies for engaging the church that is becoming; and stepping into where polarization has pulled us apart to find places of a

shared sense of God’s call around which we can work missionally and learn from each other.¹

This is the first year I have had the opportunity to attend a NEXT gathering, and I went not knowing exactly what to expect. As the only person from our Presbytery who was attending, and as the pastor of a smaller church in a small town, 1.5 hours in every direction from the only true sign of civilization, Target, I wondered what this conference could offer me and our church here in Delhi, when it was being held at my home congregation, Westminster Presbyterian, of 5,000 members in the middle of a major metropolitan area, with speakers primarily from other large Presbyterian churches or Presbyteries.

The scriptural passage that was chosen for the week, and the one which was preached on no less than four times during the week’s worship services, was from Jeremiah 29. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare...” Through preaching, worship, workshops and informal gatherings, all of us at the gathering wrestled with this text and what it means for us as the Presbyterian Church USA. How could we each genuinely seek the welfare of the contexts in which we found ourselves? Are we as a denomination the ones in exile or is someone else? What are ways that we can support one another in our individual contexts to fill the potential that God creates for us?

Over the three days of the gathering, there were two things that I noticed all who were present carried with them and held in tension. All of us; pastors, chaplains, lay leaders, old and young alike, were simultaneously worried and anxious about the decline in our

¹ Mission statement taken from NEXT Gathering 2014 booklet. www.nextchurch.net

denomination but also extremely hopeful and enthusiastic about where our future could be. And I have to say, it was strange to live in this tension with 400 complete strangers. We were invigorated by each others ideas, by those who shared the successes of their ministry settings and how the Presbyterian church cookie cutter ways were starting to crumble and be individually reshaped. But we also mourned with each other, through stories of failed attempts at revival, of congregations leaving our denomination, of churches having to closed their doors.

We lived this tension at the gathering and we live in this tension in our home places, even here in Delhi.

So I came to our text this morning, John 19, the condemnation of Jesus, with my brain buzzing full of ideas and possibilities for First Presbyterian Church in Delhi that I have picked up at NEXT, with other peoples stories, and with Jeremiah shouting in my ear “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you”; and all the clamor was hushed, my plans and ideas paused for a moment.

I was silenced and made to slow down because I knew immediately where I was in this text, I knew where we as a church and a denomination are in this text. And spoiler alert, it’s not along side Jesus. We might think we are. We think we as the Christian church, are there with Jesus getting beaten up, flogged, mocked and being threatened with death by everyone else. By our society, governments, other religions and non-believers. We thing they are the ones causing us to be beat down, that we, like Jesus, are the persecuted ones.

But as much as we are hurting, hurting to the point of talking about our demise at national gatherings, we are not Jesus standing silently there. No, it was made clear to me after this week that we are Pilate. We are Pilate, afraid, confused, trying to pass the buck on to

someone else... but ultimately we are Pilate forcefully proclaiming our power. There in the midst of the trial, in his attempt to get out of this situation, Pilate wields his biggest stick.

“Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Do you not know, Jesus, that I have control over your whole life, the power to decide whether you live or you die? I am the one in charge! What I say goes! Speak up!

I was Pilate this last week. I was Pilate along with 400 other people. As a denomination, collectively we are Pilate. We reach the point of frustration and anger and fear and we wave our big sticks at each other, shouting to the universe, we have the power! It is us who will determine whether we live or die! We need to DO something! We have the power to change our future, the power to decide how it is going to be for the Presbyterian Church USA! This is our church and we can control where it goes.

This is where I saw so many of the conversations at NEXT, if we do this, if we stop doing this, if we believe these things, if we... if we... As if we have the power and control to make all of these things possible. We’ve had the same discussions here at First. “What can we DO to bring in more members? What can we DO to not have a deficit budget every year?” We come up with plans, we take surveys, we have long congregational meetings and brainstorming sessions. We do all of this to gain control and power in a situation where we feel lost, and like Pilate, more afraid than ever. We claim our power and we try to yield it. It is up to us to change this place, so lets start making those decisions. “Do you not know church that we have the power to release you, and power to crucify you?”

We forget, all of us, that we have no power in this scenario. We are not the ones who hold the life and death of the church in our hands. We think the church is ours to control. We think the church is ours. But it’s not.

Jesus answers Pilate, “you would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above...” He tells him, you have no claim over me. You are not in control of this situation.

This power that you think you have is false and feeble.

So too is our claim of power over the church. Brothers and sisters, we forget that this is not our church. This is Christ’s church. This is Christ’s church and we are welcome in it. This is not the Presbyterian Church USA’s church, this is not First Presbyterian Church of Delhi’s church. First and foremost, this is the Church of Jesus Christ. Our power and our control over what happens here, what happens in the denomination, what happens in the world, is secondary. This thing we call church is not ours to control. It is ours to participate in.

The classic line from the Spider Man comics is “With great power comes great responsibility.” Well folks, I say “realizing you have no power comes with greater responsibility.” When we stop being more afraid than ever, when we let go of our big sticks, when we stop claiming that we have the ultimate control over what happens in this place, and we let the one who is in control and has the power take over, that is when we will face our transformation. It might not be pretty. It might even mean beatings, mocking, and ultimately calls for death. But it is our responsibility to live into where God is guiding us. It is our responsibility to hear the Spirit moving, to listen to the one who is in charge. And although church is not something we hold power over, it is something that we have power within. We have the power to proclaim the good news of the gospel. We have the power to love our neighbor as ourselves. We have the power to be continually recreated in the image of God. This is where our power lies. It lies within and not over. Let’s put our Pilates away. Only God has control over life or death. So what is NEXT for our church? What’s NEXT is

that we let go of the power we think we have, and we listen to the call of God for his church to be transformed. Amen.