A Face of Forgiveness: Jesus and Rufus
A Reading from Matthew 27: 15-26

The Sentence of Death. 15-16 Now on the occasion of the feast the governor was accustomed to release to the crowd one prisoner whom they wished. 17 And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called [Jesus] Barabbas. 18 So when they had assembled, Pilate said to them, “Which one do you want me to release to you, [Jesus] Barabbas, or Jesus called Messiah?” 19 For he knew that it was out of envy that they had handed him over. 20 While he was still seated on the bench, his wife sent him a message, “Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I suffered much in a dream today because of him.” 21 The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas but to destroy Jesus. 22 The governor said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” They answered, “Barabbas!” 23 Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus called Messiah?” They all said, “Let him be crucified!” 24 But he said, “Why? What evil has he done?” They only shouted the louder, “Let him be crucified!” 25 When Pilate saw that he was not succeeding at all, but that a riot was breaking out instead, he took water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood. Look to it yourselves.” 26 And the whole people said in reply, “His blood be upon us and upon our children.” 27 Then he released Barabbas to them, but after he had Jesus scourged, 28 he handed him over to be crucified.

Do you ever wonder why Pilate lost his nerve at the last minute? Yes, the people were crying out for Jesus’ blood, but why at this critical time? It could have been that Rufus was not there. Here begins the story of Rufus, the canine companion of Pilate:

Pilate had been a military man all his life. Anything that had to do with battle interested him, even after he was appointed to the Governorship of a hotbed of rebellion centered in Jerusalem. He had taken a particular interest in fighting dogs and had several in his kennels. Rufus, a gigantic brown mastiff was his favorite because Rufus seemed to feel the inner struggles that Pilate let no one, not even his wife, glimpse.

Pilate had taken Rufus with him on various campaigns throughout the Roman world. Their relationship became even stronger when Rufus saved his master from being run through on the battlefield near a Roman outpost. Rufus arrived in the nick of time to prevent an enemy soldier from throwing his lance that would have killed Pilate for sure. From that moment forward, Pilate and Rufus became inseparable.

The morning when Jesus was brought before his master, Rufus was in the lower part of the Governor’s palace with the members of the cohort of soldiers preparing for their day. Rufus had not slept well that previous night because Pilate, totally out of character, had entrusted his care to a centurion, Brutus. Brutus had fed Rufus and left him tied up close to a low stool that stood near the doorway to the courtyard where there was a post for tying the horses for grooming.

There was a commotion in the early morning that awakened Rufus and he turned to see a man being stripped and tied to the pole. The scourging was brutal and often lethal to someone who did not have the strength that the current prisoner evidenced.
When finished, the whole cohort assembled near where they had seated the man and they put a cloak of purple around him and a crown of thorns on his head. They continued to mock him and strike him on the head, driving the thorns deeper into his scalp. Strangely, he said nothing nor did he try to defend himself or shield himself from the blows.

Rufus detected something in the man, a sorrow deeper than anything he had ever experienced. He saw the face of the man and he could almost hear the words of forgiveness that seemed to rise like a prayer. Rufus could not bear the pain of sorrow he saw in the face of the man seated on the low stool and put his head sadly on his paws.

When the soldiers had been told that the prisoner was to be led before the people and eventually away to crucifixion, several went to gather up the tools they needed for the execution. Rufus was all alone with the man and crept closer to him whimpering. He softly licked the gaping wounds that he could reach; attempting to offer comfort, as if to ask on Pilate’s behalf, that the forgiveness he saw in the man’s face could possibly be extended to his master.

The man slightly nodded his head, as if to affirm, that indeed, forgiveness was extended to all of those who had called for his death, even the one who could have saved him, if only Pilate had shown the courage he had so often exhibited on the battlefield. He then dropped his bleeding head and shivered. The soldiers came back and roughly shoved Rufus aside, dragging the prisoner up to his feet and shoving him into the bright sunlight of the courtyard.

Rufus never could understand what happened to the man who had looked into his face that day but Rufus, however, had been changed by the forgiveness he experienced. Pilate noticed the change in his former companion and retired him from fighting and combat missions. Pilate realized that Rufus had become a gentler dog, gentle enough that the Governor’s grandchildren could ride him. He lived out his days, though not much is known about how he died. Perhaps the man, to whom he had extended comfort and care that day, came to take him home.

Here ends the story of Rufus, Pilate’s fighting dog, a dog that discovered the face of forgiveness in the face of Jesus of Nazareth.