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OPINION

Opinion: Pontius Pilate holds lesson on clergy sex abuse

By Christa Brown

(ABP) -- As Holy Week unfolds, I find myself thinking about Pontius Pilate, the powerful Roman leader who thought he could wash his hands of an innocent's blood by shoving responsibility onto others.

"I find no fault in him." That's what Pilate said about the vulnerable person who offered testimony before him. But then Pilate started worrying about his own power and his own career, and he didn't act on what he knew to be true.

Pilate had the power to release Jesus. But instead he washed his hands, and then he handed Jesus over for crucifixion.

Perhaps Pilate didn't dictate that Jesus should be crucified, but he allowed it. He made a choice. Pilate could choose to risk his career and let Jesus go free; or he could choose to protect his power at the cost of Jesus' life.

We know what Pilate decided. He protected his own power and he turned Jesus over to the religious leaders of the day. "Crucify him yourself," he said.

So Pilate evaded responsibility and passed the guilt for Jesus' crucifixion on to others. He made a big show of it. He had a wash basin brought out, and he stood before the crowd washing his hands.

Nowadays, that's what we remember him for -- the show. Pilate made a display of not liking what the crowd wanted, but then he washed his hands, turned his back, and allowed it to happen.

Southern Baptist leaders make a big show as well. They talk about "precious children," but ultimately, they choose do-nothingness in the face of clergy sex abuse reports. In effect, they bring out a big wash basin.

Southern Baptist leaders hold the power, but they shove responsibility onto others.

It's as though they all have Pontius Pilate syndrome.

Rather than use their power for the protection of innocent children -- a power they have surely shown when other issues troubled them -- Baptist leaders choose to do nothing. They wash their hands of clergy sex abuse and leave the problem up to the crowd.

They turn the safety of innocents over to the 44,000 local churches to deal with on their own, as if each of those 44,000 churches could even begin to have the resources to effectively fight the scourge of church-hopping clergy-predators. Yet, despite the churches' shared faith identity, and despite the churches' cooperative efforts on many matters, Southern Baptist leaders twist "local church autonomy" into a shibboleth of a shrug when it comes to reports of clergy sex abuse. They refuse to implement anything akin to the sorts of safeguards that other major faith groups have.

By washing their hands and shirking responsibility, Southern Baptist leaders allow clergy-predators to easily roam among their churches. They choose to protect their power structures rather than to protect innocent children.

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How can they make such a choice? Because they refuse to hear the cries of the wounded. They listen instead to lawyers and public relations people whose advice on how to handle clergy sex abuse has transformed the Southern Baptist Convention into a corporation focused on protecting its assets rather than protecting its flock.

I wonder if Pilate also had lawyers and PR people whispering in his ear.

Southern Baptist leaders may wash their hands of this, but they cannot cleanse their hearts.

These are men who hold the power to make children in Baptist churches a great deal safer. But they choose passivity instead. They refuse any denominational system for assessing clergy abuse reports. They refuse any denominational system for warning people in the pews. And they even refuse a denominational system for record-keeping on credibly-accused clergy.

They simply wash their hands of all of it.

Among other faith groups, we have seen leaders who failed miserably in the exercise of their designated responsibilities. When the lines of responsibility are clear, the blame is easier to assign.

But is it any better to have leaders who utterly refuse responsibility?

Did "washing his hands" purge Pilate of guilt for allowing the crucifixion of Jesus?

By refusing to even keep records on credibly accused clergy, Southern Baptist leaders allow the clergy-predators to easily find new prey. By washing their hands of it, they allow that many more children will have their bodies and souls rent asunder by those they trust the most.

I don't think there's a wash basin in the world that's big enough to take away their guilt.

Christa Brown is an advocate for victims of sexual abuse by Baptist clergy. She maintains the [Stop Baptist Predators](#) website and is author of [This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang](#). After a 25-year career as an appellate attorney, she is now a Ph.D. student at [Lliff School of Theology](#).

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