

## Who's Arresting Whom?

John 18:1-12

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This morning our lesson is from John 18. John's Gospel is full of layers of meaning, symbol, metaphor, analogy, paradox and irony. And today we get lots of irony.

Jesus and his disciples have been in the upper room sharing the last supper where Jesus also washed his disciples' feet, and then prays a long prayer. Then they went out, crossed over the Kidron Valley, to the Garden of Gethsemane. Roughly speaking that would be about like going from here down Austin Street across University and up to say, the Cotton Patch Restaurant. It's about the same distance across the Kidron Valley.

Meanwhile, Judas – the betrayer, leads a contingent of soldiers, Temple police, priests from the Temple, and Pharisees to the Garden looking to arrest Jesus. But it's not simply a contingent; we're not talking about 3 or 4 soldiers coming to arrest one man. The word we translate as contingent is the word for a cohort of Roman troops, which was about 500 soldiers. Down in verse 12, the word we translate as officer or captain, *chiliarchos*, means the leader of 1000 men. So we're not sure, but it sounds as if anywhere between 500 and 1000 Roman soldiers come marching up to arrest Jesus.

Of course, that's not all. There were also Temple police with them. Now the Temple Police were priests, who were really into law and order and power. We're talking preachers wearing guns. We don't know how many but enough to be

mentioned. And also chief priests from the Temple and Pharisees – remember that priests from the Temple and Pharisees, who were in the synagogues, didn't like one another. And they didn't like Romans either. But here, they join forces in their effort to get this threatening rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth.

So, as best as we can tell, there are over 500 soldiers and pistol packing preachers coming along with a bunch of religious leaders and officials – church and state joining up with one another.

Hear me clearly, when church and state get mixed up with one another it is never, never a good thing. It is bad for the state and it is bad for the church. What always happens is the state uses religion to further its goals while the church uses the state to coerce its goals – the church can't evangelize, impose its morality and vision on its own, so it uses the state to do it on its behalf. Both church and state are perverted. And everybody is hurt.

One of the many things this story tells us is that Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion. Beware of those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use violence, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware of those who cannot tell God's will from their own. Temple police are always a bad sign. When preachers start wearing guns and hanging out with the sheriff's office, watch out. When church ushers start arming themselves on Sunday morning, beware!

But that's not all. They are armed to the teeth – 500 soldiers and preachers with swords and spears, shields and body armor. They have their riot gear, their tear gas and pepper spray. A helicopter is circling overhead. Drones are swarming. They're not fooling around. They're not simply going to make an arrest; not with 500 troops ready for battle. They intend to intimidate, traumatize, and make a point

about anyone who dares to challenge the authority of Caesar, the emperor of Rome. They're going in with shock and awe. Hear me! They still seek to intimidate and overwhelm anyone who defies the power of the state.

Finally, notice they make their move in the night. Under cover of darkness, they show up in their black vans and unmarked cars, and they're all wearing black. At the same time, they're all carrying torches and lanterns. They're using spotlights, flares, bright flashlights and any other artificial light they can find in order to see the True Light of the world. Irony indeed.

500 soldiers and preachers, armed to the teeth, with lights everywhere. What are they afraid of? Who's in charge here? And why are they threatened?

All of this force; all of this power to arrest one man? And it's not like he had an army of seasoned soldiers or trained revolutionaries with him. The rag-tag disciples of Jesus were all pretty young. Jesus was about 33 and scholars tell us that Peter was perhaps around 25 or 28. The other disciples were most likely in their early 20's and late teens. And John, the beloved disciple, was the youngest and scholars say that he was about 14 or 15. Plus, remember their backgrounds – fishermen, a tax collector, assorted this and that. And that's just the men that we know about. We also know that the many women who followed were also young, although in this story of the arrest in the Garden, we don't know if any women were present or not. We do know that it is the women who stay when Jesus is executed on the cross, while all the men flee. So probably Jesus had these dozen men plus another 6 or 8 women, all of them young, and all of them had quit what they were doing, had given up everything to join the Jesus Movement.

Anyway you figure it, Jesus and these disciples should not be threatening to the Powers. Or are they? And why are they?

500 heavily armed troops and a bunch of pistol-packing preachers, with all the lights they can muster show up in the Garden of Gethsemane – which by the way is not that large of space. The Garden was about the size of our church parking lot. So it had to be a little crowded when all 500 or 600 showed up looking for this one man, Jesus.

They fan out ready for battle. Some officers are checking license plates on all the cars in the Garden parking lot, while others are videoing everyone present, including those who might simply have been bystanders. Have no doubts, the Powers are taking names and checking them twice. They want to keep up with who has been naughty or nice.

The irony continues. The mass of troops march into the Garden and Jesus steps forward to meet them, and asks, “For whom are you looking?”

The irony shifts into satire. When the troops come into the Garden and Jesus steps forward to meet them, the front line of officers stop abruptly and everyone behind them runs into the soldiers in front so you get this massive domino effect. They come to get Jesus but they don’t even know him when he steps forward. “For whom are you looking?” And they answer, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus answers, “I am he.” The more accurate translation would be “I am.” These are the same words that go all the way back to the Old Testament to Moses tending sheep in the backside of the desert in Exodus 3, when he meets God through the burning bush. When Moses asks for God’s name, God replies with “I am.” More than a name; it’s a verb – the verb to be. God was, God is, God will be.

In John, Jesus says, “I am.” I am the Bread of Life; I am the Vine; I am Living Water; I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life... I am.

When Jesus utters, “I am,” the whole cohort of soldiers and officials, preachers, and the rest with all their armor and arms, torches and lanterns, step back and fall to the ground!

What’s going on here?

Remember that Paul says in Philippians, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:9-11).

In Colossians, Paul says, “He has rescued us from the powers of darkness... He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ...” (Col. 1:13-20).

The Powers don’t like it; and whether they expect it or not, when they hear “I am” from Jesus, they fall to the ground. The Powers come face to face with the Living God Incarnate, ruler of the universe.

Speechless, they gather themselves; they get up. But Jesus must ask them again, “For whom are you looking.” Once again, they say, “Jesus of Nazareth.” And Jesus says, “I told you, I am. So if you are looking for me, let these other people go.”

Who’s arresting whom? Who’s in charge? Who rules?

At Jesus' command the Powers release the disciples and arrest Jesus. The so-called rulers of this world, with all their authority and power, cannot even do their own work. Jesus must do it for them. So they release everyone else they've grabbed and cuffed, and they seize Jesus.

This scene is so ludicrous that it's almost out of a scene of a comic movie. Except it involves violence, pain, and the eventual torture and death of Jesus, an innocent man.

Why do we have this story? And why does John tell it? It's serious business, pain-filled and tragic, but it is told with irony and satire? It is told with foolishness.

First of all, remember that the audience for John's Gospel is not the high and mighty, the rich and powerful. The people who were listening to this story from John being read to them were small bands of believers, huddled around a few lamps and candles in someone's home or in catacombs, tunnels under the city of Rome. They were hiding out from the Powers. They were persecuted, wanted. They knew the federal police were looking for them. They were outnumbered, overwhelmed, afraid, disheartened, and in despair.

And John writes them of Jesus' own arrest, showing them that the Powers of Death do not have all the power. Indeed, ultimately the Powers are supposed to be in the service of God. They are to be servants of goodness and peace. That's why they were created in the first place. But they have rebelled against God, trying to live and rule for themselves. And they think that anyone who refuses to knuckle under to their rule, must be crushed.

To encourage the scattered, small, rag-tag followers of Jesus – John unmasks them. He exposes them and shows them to all of us for what they truly are. And the

way he does that is by using irony and satire. And the Powers of Death are not in charge. Jesus Christ is ultimately in charge.

Using foolishness and humor, satire, and irony is a time-honored method by those considered weak against the Powers of Death. It is one way we punch a hole in their balloons of pretension.

Remember back in Matthew 5:40, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “If anyone takes you to court to take your coat, give them your cloak, as well. In other words, when the Economic Powers have milked poor people to the point that all they have left are the clothes on their back, and they’re suing in court to get that. Give them your outer clothes and your underwear too. Walk out of court naked, showing what the economic system truly is. By being naked, you show that in reality it is the emperor and the system who has no clothes.

The Apostle Paul says in Colossians, that Jesus “disarmed the Powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them” (2: 15). That’s what John is showing us. Jesus is exposing the Powers and disarming them. The Powers want to convince us that they are large and in-charge and that they know and serve all that is important, good, just, and right.

On this very day, we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem riding a donkey instead of a warhorse, lampooning the pretensions of the conquering generals and emperors. Jesus showing the Rulers, the Powers, and the Systems of Domination for who they truly are. They don’t serve all that is good and just and right. And they don’t have the power they like to think they have. The Powers are not the rulers; Jesus Christ is Lord and Ruler.

About a dozen years ago, Austin Heights was heavily involved in resisting the TransCanada Keystone XL tarsands pipeline. We regularly had a dozen or

more young protesters in church every Sunday, and often I spent part of the week visiting them in jail and testifying on their behalf in court. We were regularly surveilled by the Powers that Be, whether law enforcement agencies or the billion-dollar company. We know that our church phone had a tap on it, we know we had an undercover FBI agent attending church here on a regular basis, and that our attendance in church was videoed by law enforcement. In itself, all of that was pretty ludicrous. A billion-dollar international corporation investing all of that time, effort and money because a congregation of less than a hundred people resisted them.

One of the protesters, who went by the name of Doug, got a job in a big Houston suburb country club as a groundskeeper. For several weeks, he mowed and weeded and watered the golf course. Then, TransCanada sponsored a pro-am golf tourney and Doug got a job carrying the leader board, a sign that showed who was in the lead of the tournament. At the big conclusion to the tournament, at the 18th green, the president of TransCanada was presenting the trophy to the winner, while the crowd and the media all filmed everything. In the background behind the officials, stood Doug with the leaderboard. As the cameras and lights focused on the corporate president making the presentation, Doug simply turned over the leaderboard which had sign saying, "Stop the Pipeline." As the crowd and the media saw the sign in the background, every camera shifted to the sign, the crowd roared in laughter, and finally the president turned to see what the commotion was all about. Enraged, he yelled, "Get that guy!" Doug dropped the sign and took off running across the golf course, while security guards gave chase. Other guards joined in golf carts and for the next several minutes it was a ludicrous scene out of a comedy with golf carts running here and there barely avoiding running into one another, and out of shape security guards running after one, young protester.



Eventually, they got him and he spent one night in jail. When he was released one of the police officers even said to him, “Heh, you’re doing good work.”

Irony and satire and parody. Much of the time, it all seems fragile, puny, and foolish. The Powers don’t like to be exposed. How ludicrous and ironic that 500 heavily armed soldiers seek to arrest one man, Jesus, and can’t even do that without his direction.

How ironic that Jesus our King rules not by power but in weakness; not by fear but by love; not by coercion but by forgiveness and grace. Jesus Christ rules not from a throne but from the cross.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.