

March 4, 2018
Third Sunday of Lent
“Condemned By the Righteous”

This sermon is based on *24 Hours That Changed the World* by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. See pages 45-53.

I will only be brushing the surface of this meaningful book. I heartily recommend it for anyone who seeks a better understanding of Jesus’ last day and all the significance it holds for Christians and the world.

Mark 14: 53, 55 – 65, *Common English Bible*

They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders, and legal experts gathered. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they couldn’t find any. Many brought false testimony against him, but they contradicted each other. Some stood to offer false witness against him, saying, “We heard him saying, ‘I will destroy this temple, constructed by humans, and within three days I will build another, one not made by humans.’” But their testimonies didn’t agree even on this point.

Then the high priest stood up in the middle of the gathering and examined Jesus. “Aren’t you going to respond to the testimony these people have brought against you?” But Jesus was silent and didn’t answer. Again, the high priest asked, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed one?”

Jesus said, “I am. And you will see the Human One sitting on the right side of the Almighty and coming on the heavenly clouds.”

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we need any more witnesses? You’ve heard his insult against God. What do you think?”

They all condemned him. “He deserves to die!”

Some began to spit on him. Some covered his face and hit him, saying, “Prophesy!” Then the guards took him and beat him.

From his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was betrayed by Judas, then accosted by a mob sent by the chief priests, legal experts and elders of the Temple. The mob took him to stand before the Sanhedrin. This likely took place in the grand hall of the mansion owned by the chief priest. The Sanhedrin was the ruling Jewish council, made up of 71 elders who were

thought to be the wisest and most holy men among the Jews. Its existence was based on Numbers 11: 16, where God tells Moses to call 71 leaders who, along with Moses, would govern the people. In Jesus' day these men oversaw the religious life of the Jewish people, while the Romans took care of the political life. The Sanhedrin controlled the religious courts and the Temple. They were known for their devotion to God. The chief priest was like our bishop—the leading religious figure for the people.

Under normal conditions, the Sanhedrin met in the Temple courts during the day, and there was no meeting during religious holidays. So their meeting in the chief priest's home, in the middle of the night, during the Passover points to some stealth and urgency. Jesus was such a threat to them that they couldn't risk being transparent about their dealings with him.

There is something else important about this scene that we shouldn't miss. ***Jesus wasn't being condemned by the sinners***—the bad people who had a stake in the evil he came to overcome. It wasn't the drug dealers, the organized crime bosses, the money launderers, the human traffickers who wanted to get rid of him. ***It was the most religious and holy people in the land who wanted him gone.*** The God that they said they served was walking among them, but they couldn't see that! They were so blinded by their love of power and the status quo that they couldn't recognize God right in front of them. Instead, they arrested God in the dark of night and put him on trial for blasphemy! They ignored their own procedure, ignored the evidence before their eyes, and sentenced God to death. Then they spit on him and beat him.

How is this even possible? How could these pious men look right at the object of their worship and miss it? The answer comes down to something pretty simple: fear.

As Hamilton says:

These men saw Jesus as a threat to their way of life, their positions of authority, their status among the Jews. They had seen the crowds flocking to him and had heard them say, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). ***Jesus threatened the very social order.***

It was the social order that the men of the Sanhedrin benefitted from. ***And that frightened them right down to their bones.*** Therefore, Jesus was dangerous and had to be destroyed. And their fear bred hate. And hate, as usual, led to acts of inhumanity and tragedy.

So this story is not really about the Sanhedrin, it's about our human condition. We are all born into fear. What's the first thing a baby does on entering the world? Usually, it's to cry in fear. This can be a good thing, because God has given us fear to protect ourselves. There are times when we need to fear, so that we can fight or flee from danger. But sadly, our self-preservation is connected to our sin. We are all broken. Our good self-preservation becomes sin as soon as we use it to preserve ourselves to the detriment of others.

Fear is a poison that works in all people. We need to think about what this story has to do with us, and admit that we are often motivated by fear. If we think about some of the most evil things done in our world, they are almost exclusively motivated by fear. Many in our nation feared their Japanese neighbors during WWII, so their property was confiscated and they were imprisoned while committing no crimes. Joseph McCarthy was afraid of dissenting ideas, so he called them “communist,” persecuted those who he thought held them (whether they did or not), and got many others to go along with him. In the process, lives were ruined. Martin Luther King Jr.’s work for racial equality was frightening to many white people, who could only see this as a loss of their power. So it was met with violent opposition. And today we have incredible political division, mostly because we’re afraid of what we might lose if others have power. Everything that might possibly be good for our opponents is seen as a loss for us. We cannot even work together on common goals because that fear runs so deep.

We need to recognize that because of our fear, it is possible for all of us to support or do things that are against God’s will. Like the Sanhedrin, we are capable of denying God to his face in order to reduce our own anxiety. We probably would have done the same thing as they did had we been there and in their position.

That said, there may well have been those among the Sanhedrin who thought that condemning Jesus might be a mistake. Maybe they even wondered if he really was the Messiah. This may have been the case for Joseph of Arimathea. He seems to have been a member of the Sanhedrin, yet was described as a “secret disciple of Jesus, because he feared the Jews” (FEARED!). After the crucifixion, he took charge of Jesus’ body, and may have had it buried in Joseph’s own tomb. (see Matthew 27: 57; Mark 15: 43-46; Luke 23: 50-56; John 19: 38-40) But, we have no record of anyone, including Joseph, standing up for Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Which leads to another fact about human nature: ***going against the majority or against those in authority, even if we think they are wrong, is exceedingly difficult.***

We fear looking foolish. We fear going against the tide of opinion. We fear losing status. We fear being lumped with those who are being persecuted. ***We fear!*** And our fear makes us a part of the sin.

There have been times in my life when I stood up to a group I disagreed with. Occasionally, in the hospital where I worked as a psychologist, I felt it was my role to advocate for patients, even against the interests of staff. The measure of how difficult it was is that I can’t even remember the issues, only the anxiety that made me tremble as I did so. There have been many other times that I’ve ignored racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism or other remarks that demeaned people for the sake of maintaining “peace” with others. I’m ashamed of it, and it humbles me.

Martin Niemöller was a German Lutheran pastor in the age of the Nazis. He originally supported Hitler, because Hitler promised to protect the church and not have pogroms against the Jews; and, Niemöller feared (***feared!***) the growth of the atheistic movement that opposed Hitler. Eventually though, in the face of oppression and atrocities, he ended up defying Nazi state

influence on the church, and their persecution of the Jews. It earned him seven years in a concentration camp.

I bring him up because of words attributed to him that show his understanding of this situation:

First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me and by that time there was no one left to speak up anymore.

No one in the Sanhedrin spoke up. No one questioned the tide of the majority. No one publicly wondered if this decision was consistent with their faith. They just let their fear overcome them and lead them into sin. As broken humans, we are always in danger of doing the same.

So how do we respond with faith in the face of sin? How do we speak up against what is wrong? I have a suggestion, and we could call it The Rule of Love.

When faced with tough choices, when faced with our fears, we tend to ask, "What will make me less anxious?" I think that's entirely the wrong question. Rather, ***we should be asking, "What is the most loving thing to do?"***

In our personal lives, when we come to a fork in the road, we should ask ourselves what direction love would choose.

In our communities, when we see injustice or bigotry, we should ask ourselves how love would respond.

In our public policies and political life, we should be asking ourselves what Jesus would do and how we can act with his love.

In the final analysis, it is only love that that can defeat hate and fear. As it says in 1 John 4: 16-21:

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. This commandment

we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

We tend to think of love as a warm, mushy feeling. But it's not a feeling—it's an action. Love means refusing to give into fear, to remain quiet in the face of injustice. Love means standing up for our brother and sister against the powers that be, even, and especially, when it's hard.

We can't blame the Sanhedrin for condemning Jesus, because we too fail to do what is right in the face of our fear. But we can do our best to push through our fear and act in the love that Jesus calls us to.

This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

1 John 4: 10-11

That's why Jesus set his steps toward Jerusalem. That's why he anguished in the Garden of Gethsemane. That's why he allowed himself to be before the Sanhedrin in the first place. That's why:

he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

Philippians 2: 7-8

This is a hard road—the road to Jerusalem. This is carrying Christ's cross. This self-emptying is the essence of Lent.

References:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Niem%C3%B6ller