



First Lutheran Church

Gospel of Matthew

Summer 2026 Reading Challenge



Deep Dive: corporal punishment

Week 14: Matthew chapters 27 and 28

Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Matthew 27:22

Talking to the Kids
It is not easy to talk with kids about why we as a species have something called the death penalty. Sure, we might be able to get away with saying "Only really bad people are put to death." And then we point out that this is reserved for those who have taken a life of another, or who have committed treason. But even then, trying to distinguish what makes someone worthy of death or not worthy of death is difficult.

Kids are at a stage of ethical and moral development where understanding nuance is hard. So when we talk about Jesus' death with them, they are seeking understanding of why God's own son had to die. And through the centuries, the church has come up with lots of ways to explain it.

In the end, it is okay to wrestle with not understanding. It is okay to say it is wrong to put someone to death, and to say Jesus' should not have been crucified. It is okay to wonder and be baffled and to say it makes no sense at all.

Matthew 27 is like a really fast episode of Law and Order, where we skip the part of did Jesus even commit a crime and jump straight to Jesus deserves to die. The crowd is whipped up into a frenzy by the chief priests and the elders, and all they want is someone's blood. This isn't even a kangaroo court. This is a death sentence just needing someone to receive it, and Jesus is the unfortunate fool who happens to get it.

Now much theological wrestling has happened over the years trying to justify why Jesus had to die. Theological constructs have developed explaining everything from original sin to substitutionary atonement theories. Theologians have said Jesus died to save others from hell. Jesus died to satisfy God's anger. Jesus died because it was the only way for the Gospel to be proclaimed. Jesus died to open the path to everlasting life that was previously closed. And this is just a short summary of ways people have tried to understand Jesus' death.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' death is actually quite simple. The chief priests saw a problem with Jesus' preaching, so they convinced the Roman governor that Jesus was a traitor against Rome by calling himself King, and Pilate executed Jesus for being a traitor against Rome. There is no theological justification in Matthew. This is all political. All corporal punishment is political. We can't have people who are so terrible still roaming the earth, so we need to simply get rid of them and death is the ultimate way of getting rid of them.

And our human need to get rid of people who are problems means we need to have cruel ways of getting rid of them. Like the more cruel the death, the more the problem feels pain, somehow we are more satisfied. So a person who gets shot has more mercy in death than a person burned alive. Or a person who has medication given to stop the nerves from receiving pain before medication that stops the heart is given -- that is more merciful than a person strapped to a chair with electricity flowing through the body. Yes, this conversation is gruesome. It is supposed to be. The death of Jesus is gruesome. This is not pleasant. Sure we could gloss over it and get to the beautiful resurrection. But that skips the point. Jesus' death was gruesome and horribly painful and completely unnecessary except for a bunch of political factors that said his preaching and healing and feeding people and proclaiming forgiveness was dangerous. So dangerous that we needed to get rid of the problem. The death of Jesus should not be glossed over with theological platitudes that simplify his death to mean we won't go to hell. It should be confronted head on and lead us to question why do we still put people to death.

Gathered by God, we live our faith with: Compassion, Grace, Gratitude, and Joy

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