

Melanie Rosa  
Lakewood UMC

“Condemned by the Righteous”

February 24, 2008  
Mark 14:53-72

Today we come to the third sermon in the series in which we have been looking at the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. We began two weeks ago with the study of the Last Supper Passover meal that Jesus transformed. Last week we looked at what happened after supper as the disciples went across the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus prayed in agony while the disciples fell asleep. Judas then betrayed Jesus with a kiss, and brought the Temple guards to arrest him. This morning we pick up the story with the Temple guards preparing to take Jesus to the high priest's home. He will be tried by the Sanhedrin. He will give his own testimony about his life. My intention this morning is for us to consider what his experience of being condemned to death by the righteous means for us today.

After his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus makes his way down through the Kidron Valley being bound by hand and foot. He is led by the Temple guard through the valley and as he does so he walks past the Temple. He walks past the gates where Ezekiel says the Messiah will one day place his feet. He walks by the pinnacle of the Temple, a place where Jesus was taken during his time of temptation in the desert, where the devil asked him to cast himself down and prove he was the Messiah. He continues down the Kidron Valley past the old city where his great, great grandfather King David had built the city in Jerusalem. As Jesus came to the bottom of the Kidron Valley there is a body of water. This is the pool of Siloam where Jesus healed a man who was blind. We can only imagine the thoughts and memories that were flooding his mind as he was being led away by the guards for the last time.

Then Jesus would have walked into the lower city of Jerusalem where he would begin to climb the stairway that would lead to the house of Caiaphas who was the high priest and who lived in Jerusalem. This is the journey that Jesus would have taken late that night after the Last Supper, after his prayer in the Garden. It is about 1 mile and it would have taken about 30 minutes to an hour, considering that Jesus was bound when he made this journey. When he arrived at the house of the High Priest Caiaphas, he would have gone up some steps leading up to the house, steps that are there to this day and believed to be the very steps that Jesus took as he walked up to stand before the high priest. There is now a church on this site, which is called the church of St. Peter Gallincantu, which is the French word for “cock crow.” When you go into the church and go down two levels you will find a prison cell which was once a cistern. This is where Jesus would have been kept underground while he was being tried. They would have lowered him down

through a hole in the ceiling into that cold, damp cell. Jesus would have been held there while he listened to the Sanhedrin debate his fate in the courtroom above. Now, the Sanhedrin was a group of 71 elders, wise sages of Israel. These were the most pious men of their culture. The number 71 comes from the Old Testament book of Numbers. 1200 years before the time of Jesus God told Moses to gather 70 Elders to join him in ruling over the Hebrew people. So 71 was the number of the Sanhedrin based upon their Jewish history. They were concerned with religious affairs, while the Romans oversaw political affairs. These 71 men controlled the Temple, religious beliefs and the religious courts. They were considered the most holy men of their time. The high priest Caiaphas would have been like the Pope, the leading religious figure of his day.

As we consider Jesus being tried before these righteous folks, we can clearly see the tragic irony in this story. Christians believe that in Jesus God was made flesh and walked the earth. As God is walking in human flesh, the people who arrested him and try him are the most pious and religious people of their time. Do you see the irony in this? The God they claim to serve had come and walked among them and they could not see him. Not only did the people that you would expect to see him not even recognize him, but they are the very ones who put him on trial.

There is another interesting twist to this story. The Sanhedrin never met at night, but were to meet during the day. They were always to meet in the temple courts and not in the high priest house. They were not supposed to meet during the festivals. But the Sanhedrin call themselves together at night, not in the temple courts but in a house, and during the Passover. This is a most unorthodox trial. Finally, they convict God in the flesh of a crime worthy of death. They convict him of blasphemy against himself. It is so ironic.

After they condemn him to death, these pious men begin to spit on him. Then they blindfold him so they can mock him. They strike him and laugh at him and they turn him over to the guards to beat him again. God showed up on earth, and this is what humanity did to him.

Now, if you or I had been a part of the Sanhedrin, I cannot help but wonder if we would have done the same things. I don't know about you, but I recognize myself in the Sanhedrin. Jesus would have been a threat to my authority, and I probably would have made the same decision and gone along with the majority. This story is not just about 71 men who were supposed to be pious in the first century, but like all of the stories in the Bible, this is about us. Why did the Sanhedrin fail to

see God in the flesh? Why did they condemn an innocent man to death? Even if they thought he was a false messiah, why would pious men spit on him? Why would they blindfold and strike him? Because they were afraid.

In this story you can clearly see that the Sanhedrin were threatened by Jesus. He was a threat to everything they knew and believed in. He threatened the social order. He threatened their standing within the community. He was popular, crowds gathered around him people followed him. They said, "He preaches with authority, not like our chief priests."

Caiaphas the high priest, or the pope of the first century, would have thought that Jesus was dangerous. If people continue to flock to him the Romans would violently repress the Jewish people. This might actually lead to a revolution. It would be better for Jesus to die.

It is the history of the human race to be afraid of those who are different, to be afraid of the world that we know is changing, and to react in fear. And fear gives birth to hate. And that is a deadly combination.

When I look at the Sanhedrin, I see myself. Not only because I happen to be a religious professional, one of the very people Jesus disliked so much. But because I easily could have seen the logic in their argument and gone along with the crowd. I would not want to be the only one with a minority opinion. If these wise religious leaders feel Jesus had to die, well there must be good reason. I am often prone to just go along with the crowd rather than stand up and be different.

When I was in elementary school I was bused for awhile to Asbury, a school at the corner of Evans and Downing. In my class was a girl who was very, very poor. Her clothes were ragged and dirty, her hair was matted and tangled, and the kids in my class were so mean to her it broke my heart. They stole her lunch nearly every day. They pulled her hair and nobody ever played with her. They called her names. It bothered me, but you know, I never stood up for her. I never said anything. I went along with the crowd. I didn't want them to hate me too and turn on me. I just kept my mouth shut. Then in Junior High school I remember a boy who was gay. That was the early 1970s and being gay was not nearly as accepted as it is today, although we still have a long, long way to go in the acceptance area. But that boy was ostracized, he was teased, he had no friends. And while I felt sorry for him, I did not stand up for him either. I didn't want those bullies to hate me too. And you know, that to this day I can see their faces, that girl and that boy. I wonder what became of them and if anybody ever did have the courage to stand up for them.

I can picture myself in a late night meeting of the Sanhedrin saying, "Sure, crucify him." I know I could have easily gone along with the crowd, because I have done it before. Acting out of fear causes us to do things that we know are cowardly or wrong. When we act out of fear we almost always do the wrong thing.

As people who follow Jesus Christ we believe that in the end love conquers in ways that fear and hate simply cannot. This is what Jesus teaches us about the ways of God. We must always ask, what is the most loving thing for me to do? And no matter how much courage it takes, we have to do the most loving thing.

As I think about the Sanhedrin, I do not believe that all 71 of these men thought that they were doing the right thing in spitting upon him, beating him, and calling for his death. I suspect that a few of those spiritual leaders were having second thoughts and thinking to themselves, "This man could be God in the flesh, who knows?" But in the Gospels, every single one of them agreed to his death, at least as far as we know. I have a feeling there were some who later thought, "Why didn't I say anything and stand up for Jesus Christ?" I am reminded of that famous quote from Pastor Martin Niemöller. He was a pastor in Nazi Germany who was actually an anti-Semite until he spent seven years in a German concentration camp. Initially he was afraid to speak up, but after being imprisoned himself he finally spoke out. He said:

***First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.***

***Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the homosexuals and I did not speak out because I was not homosexual.***

***Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.***

***Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.***

It was 18th century British philosopher Edmund Burke who said: "The Only Thing Necessary for Evil to Triumph is for good people to do nothing." Keeping silent and doing nothing when you see something is wrong is a sin. And sins of passive omission can be just as serious as sins of commission. Sometimes all it takes is one person to speak up. Are you willing to be that person?

Of course no one did speak out that night in defense of Jesus and so he is left to give his own testimony about himself. When asked if he is indeed the Christ, Jesus simply says, "I am; and you will see me seated at the right hand of God, coming with the clouds of heaven." That's it. He is not trying to change their minds. He simply tells them who he is. And they decide to kill him anyway.

This last part of the story deals with Peter's denial of Jesus. While it is easy to pick on Peter for being a coward we also need to see his courage up to this point in the story. He was in the garden of Gethsemane when the guards came to arrest Jesus and he is the only one that stands up for Jesus. Peter takes out his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priests servant. In Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospel we find that as Jesus is led away the disciples flee, all except for Peter who follows in a distance. Peter follows the guards as they take Jesus to Caiaphas' house. It is there that Peter has the courage to go into the outer court yard to see what is going on. It took courage to do that. Jesus was being condemned to death, and Peter could have been condemned as well. Peter does something bold and courageous here. But then, when Peter is called out by a servant girl who says that she saw him with Jesus, the fear kicks in. Three times that night Peter is confronted by people who say they saw him with Jesus and three times he denies that because he is afraid for his life. Who could blame him?

After Peter denies Jesus a third time the cock crows twice and we are told that he wept bitterly. In Luke's Gospel we are told that Jesus somehow made eye contact with Peter from inside the house of Caiaphas and as their eyes met Peter was sick at heart over what he had just done to Jesus.

All four Gospels tell us the story of Peter's denial, but how did they get it? Peter is the only person who was there and so we know that Peter himself had to have told this story. No doubt he told it when he preached after the resurrection of Jesus.

From this time forward Peter would never deny Jesus again. He was so convicted by his cowardice that he would stand up for Christ until finally, just before the gospel of Mark was written, he was crucified upside down as a witness for Christ.

All of us will betray and deny Jesus, and we have done it already. We will behave in cowardly ways that betray our identity as disciples of the living God. So here's the question I want you to consider today: Are you willing to stand up and be counted as one of his disciples? Are you willing to let people know that you are a Christian in your neighborhood, at your school, in the workplace? Do the people in every area of your life know that you attend church, that you care about the lost, that you are a follower of Jesus Christ? Or have you been timid about that because it is just too embarrassing? Are you willing to stand up when you know that someone is doing something wrong and say, "I just don't think that is right?"

It is easy for us to be reserved about letting people know that we are Christians, partly because there are so many horrible representations of Christianity out there. We all know examples of judgmental, self-righteous, narrow minded Christians, and some of them actually behave in such a way that it hurts the cause of Christ. But if we take our faith seriously, we need to stand up and be counted.

Today we have learned about the Jewish Sanhedrin and about how righteous people can do the wrong thing when they are motivated primarily by fear. We've learned that there is a tendency within all of us to be silent in the face of those things that are wrong and that if one person has the courage to speak up things might change in the future. And we

learned that Peter was able to transform his weakness into a strength, when he finally found the courage to stand up for Jesus Christ. I hope that we have also learned a little bit about ourselves, and the ways in which we might become even better disciples of Jesus Christ.

## STUDY NOTES

### **Monday, February 25, 2008: Read Mark 14:53-65**

Jewish civil and religious trials had strict rules and procedures. Trials were supposed to be held during daylight hours, not on holidays, and with sworn dependable witnesses. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt helpless and frustrated because the “verdict” was a foregone conclusion, and nothing you could say or do would influence the outcome?

Pray today that those around the world who are victims of unjust legal systems might find both justice and peace.

### **Tuesday, February 26, 2008 Read Mark 14:66-72**

We read last week that during the Passover meal, Peter adamantly declared he would never deny his identification as a disciple of Jesus. Have you ever been ashamed or embarrassed to be called a Christian?

What do you think would have happened to Peter if he had NOT denied he knew Jesus? Should that have influenced his behavior?

Pray today for those fellow believers around the world who pay an extreme price for publicly acknowledging that they are followers of Jesus Christ.

### **Wednesday, February 27, 2008 Read John 21:1-17**

Some of the disciples went right back to their “regular” jobs (like fishing) shortly after the events of Holy Week. Do you think you can be an effective and faithful disciple of Jesus in your job? Are there jobs where that would be difficult or impossible?

In verses 15-17 of today’s reading we see one of the most powerful scenes recorded in the Gospels. Three times Peter denied Jesus, and three times Jesus asks if Peter loves him. Three times Jesus restores and empowers Peter’s relationship to God through the risen Messiah. Have you ever felt you have sinned beyond God’s capacity or willingness to forgive? What does this story tell you about that?

Pray today for those people who feel they are beyond the redeeming love of God as shown in Jesus Christ.

**Thursday, February 28, 2008     Read Matthew 26:57-64**

Today we return to the story of Jesus' arrest and trial, but from the perspective of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus "conviction" here is based on the testimony of 2 witnesses (in vs. 60-61) who misunderstood Jesus' saying as recorded in John 2:19, where he predicted his own death and resurrection. Have you ever been in a situation where someone totally misunderstood your meaning?

This passage reports on the religious trial Jesus endured for his alleged blasphemy - acknowledging his role as Messiah (vs. 63-64). The entire time frame of the events from the Passover meal to Jesus' arrest, through his trials and crucifixion was under 24 hours. Think about the worst single day you have ever faced; was your faith of help? Why or why not?

Pray today for those enduring disease and mourning, that they may feel the presence and comfort of God.

**Friday, February 29, 2008****Read Isaiah 53:1-9**

Today we look briefly at one of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. One of the verses (Isaiah 53:7) takes us back to Jesus trials. Why do you think Jesus made no response to his accusers?

Spend a few moments reflecting on the Old and New Testament titles given to Jesus: Lamb of God; Prince of Peace; Anointed One (Messiah); Son of Man; Son of God; Savior. What do these mean to you?

Pray today for all those in the church who give their time to teach us, and our children, about our faith.

**Saturday, March 1, 2008**

**Prepare your hearts for tomorrow's worship and sermon by reading and meditating on the text that will be used:**

**Mark 15:1-15     "Barabbas and Pilate"**

Pray that tomorrow's worship will be meaningful for all who attend, especially for those worshiping with us for the first time.