

Matthew 26:14—27:66

My friends, I thought we would try to do something a little different this year. Since I have been here at First Presbyterian Church, we have always celebrated Palm Sunday. We did this because we offered a Maundy Thursday service and a joint Good Friday service with our brothers and sisters at Our Saviours. Well this year has brought new challenges and new opportunities for us. It is not wise to do a joint service, and although Maundy Thursday is very important, it also was not well attended, and the center piece of that service is communion. Another thing that would be difficult to do through social distancing.

Instead we are going to do something called Passion Sunday. Our reading from Matthew will cover all of Holy week. This allows people to hear the story of Jesus's last days and crucifixion, which is important; especially since for those who don't attend Holy Week services they go from Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, to Jesus's triumph over death, skipping the difficult and painful parts of the story.

As I mentioned the gospel reading from Matthew is quite long, so to break things up, and expound on different parts, I'm going to say a few words at different points, So, let us begin with prayer.

Let us pray. Holy One, our strength in suffering and our hope for salvation, lift up your Word of life and pour out your Spirit of grace so that we may follow faithfully all the way to the cross; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples." 'So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

Why did Judas decide to betray Jesus? We know from other readings that he was the purse holder for the group of Jesus's disciples and followers; we also know that he was possibly a bit corrupt in those dealings and keeping some of the money for himself. When he went to the Chief Priests, did he know that this would mean the death of Jesus? It's possible that he didn't. Roman law declared that only Roman officials could execute people. The Jewish leaders could have flogged him, or maybe imprisoned him, but the Roman's were the only ones allowed to kill him. Maybe Judas assumed that the punishment would be lighter than it was?

He was offered thirty pieces of silver. How much was that exactly? Well, there were different silver coins of the time, The Roman denarii, the Tyrian shekel, and the Antioch stater.

Each had a different silver content. A laborer's wages were about one silver coin a day, so thirty shekels were worth about five weeks of work (assuming the standard six-day work week).

One website that talks about coins pointed this out: "What's more revealing is the gospel writer Matthew's intent. The phrase he used, "30 pieces of silver," is a throwback to a reference in the book of Zechariah. In Zechariah 11 this phrase is used to mean the value of a slave and is based on Jewish Law. Exodus 21:32 states: "If the bull gores a male or female slave, the owner must pay thirty shekels of silver to the master of the slave, and the bull is to be stoned to death."

The prophet Zechariah asked the Israelites to pay him for the work he had done working among them, that's what they gave him. It was meant to be an insult; they didn't value his prophecy. Jehovah told Zechariah to throw this slave's wage into the treasury (back in their faces).

So, when Matthew says 30 pieces of silver and has Judas throw it back into the treasury, it's an allusion to this story in Zechariah in which unfaithful Jews undervalued a prophet of the Lord with an insulting amount of money - what a slave is worth. Matthew is saying the priests were willing to pay almost nothing for Jesus. They were angry at Jesus for the scene he'd made at the temple overturning the moneylenders' tables and railing against the corrupt priests profiting off the sacrifices people brought to the Jerusalem to make to God out of devotion and duty. Thirty pieces of silver to the priests, to Matthew, to Zechariah, then, was the price of contempt."

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

These words, or similar ones quoted in Luke and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. These are the words we say as we consecrate the bread and the cup of communion. Words that told the disciples then, and us today, that Jesus knew he was to be killed, and knew that he would be resurrected, and that in that process we all could be resurrected as well.

Many of us are confused by why he would bless bread and after the meal bless the wine; since most of us drink with our meal, but that was not how things were done back then. The beverage was served after the food was eaten.

I'm sure Jesus's disciples were confused by what Jesus was saying. It has been so ingrained in us to understand the bread and cup symbolizing, or even actually being the body and blood of Christ, yet that wouldn't have made much sense to them at the time.

The only connection being that they were celebrating the Seder meal of Passover, and eating the sacrificial lamb, which represented the lamb killed for it's blood to mark the lintels of the doors of the homes of Israelites in Egypt, when death came and took the first born of every house that was not marked.

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.’ Peter said to him, ‘Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.’ Peter said to him, ‘Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.’ And so said all the disciples.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’

Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, ‘So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ Again he went away for the second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.’ Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.’

Peter, Peter, Peter. What can be said about him? He is portrayed in the gospels as being so eager to do what Jesus asks, yet he falls short almost every time. He is like so many of us; we try to follow Jesus, we try to do as God wants us to do, yet so many times we fall short as well. Despite this Jesus, and God, still loves us, cares for us, and continually tries to show us the right way. Isn’t it wonderful to realize, despite all of his flaws, that God was still able to use him to create the church? Much like Peter, we can learn from our mistakes, and we can become better because of them.

What else can be said about this section? I think it is important to note that Jesus, even though he knew what was to happen, did not want to do it. This just shows us that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Jesus knew that he would suffer humiliation, and unbelievable pain, none of it would be taken away during this time. He begged to God for another way, yet in the end he still stood up and did what needed to be done.

For so many of us that can be hard. Most of us are not built to be martyrs. And as we can see from the text, even Jesus looked for other options as the time drew near, yet when God asks us to sacrifice something, are we willing to give it up? Are we willing to give up fame, money, family, our health, or even our lives if God asks it of us? What are we willing to sacrifice?

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.’ At once he came up to Jesus and said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed him. Jesus said to him, ‘Friend, do what you are here to do.’ Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I

cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?’ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, ‘Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.’ Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Jesus makes an interesting point, what was it that pushed things to the point of sending temple guards to get Jesus? Why now? Certainly, it has to do with prophesy being fulfilled, but I think it is more than that. According to most of the gospels Jesus had come to Jerusalem and had pushed things to the limit. He entered Jerusalem with a parade at the same time that the governor was entering the city from the other side; stealing the limelight from Pilate’s military procession.

The next day Jesus goes to the Temple and chases out the money lenders, who gave a big cut to the high priests and the Roman government.

He then spends several days talking to the people at the Temple. He prophesied about the Temple being destroyed and rebuilt. He talked about taxes, and he upset the high priests with the way he helped the poor and sick and his talk of resurrection. He had been pushing the buttons of the people in power for practically a week, so of course they wanted to silence him, yet he was popular enough that they needed to do it out of the sight of the crowd, otherwise there could be riots and outright rebellion. So, what better time than in the depths of night in an out of the way place?

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, ‘This fellow said, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.” ’ The high priest stood up and said, ‘Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?’ But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, ‘I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?’ They answered, ‘He deserves death.’ Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, ‘Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?’

The high priest, the elders, and the scribes are warnings for us all. They are people in power who are so concerned with keeping their power, that they are willing to sacrifice others to keep the status quo. Much like back then, today there are people that only want to keep their own status or power and position. People who don’t want the system to change because they could lose something, even if it might just be the loss of separation between them and those who they deem less than themselves.

The high priest uses blasphemy as his excuse for prosecuting Jesus, but it should be noted that Jesus never actually does so, nor can they find anyone to truthfully testify against him. When asked if he is the messiah he says, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” They have no evidence against him, but decide to declare him guilty anyway, all to secure their own places of power and appease the Romans above them.

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, ‘You also were with Jesus the Galilean.’ But he denied it before all of them, saying, ‘I do not know what you are talking about.’ When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, ‘This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ Again he denied it with an oath, ‘I do not know the man.’ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.’ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know the man!’ At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: ‘Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.

It can be easy for us to try to hide our faith. Many times, it’s because we don’t want to offend others and to be one of “those” kinds of Christians. A Christian who beats people over the head with hypocritical righteousness, and a demand that everyone accepts Jesus our way and worship God in the way that we do.

Yet sometimes we can take that too far. We can become so concerned about fitting in that we forget that Jesus asks us to set ourselves apart. We are asked to be different, not flaunting our faith, yet still being God’s light in the world. Still showing people the way that God would like us to live; still showing love and kindness to others no matter what their differences are.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ But they said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’ Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, ‘It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.’ After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter’s field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me.’

Juda was a smart guy. He knew the law and knew what punishments were allowed and what weren’t. Unfortunately, he did not recognize how upsetting Jesus had become to not only the Temple leaders, but to the Romans as well. When he realized that things were more serious than anticipated he went back to try to right things, but it was too late. The deed was done, and the consequences would be paid.

How many times have we done something that has turned out badly? Perhaps it was wholly unintentional, or perhaps we did something knowing that it might cause issues but were willing to risk it. When the covid-19 virus started cause a panic some entrepreneurs went to every store they could, some driving hundreds of miles, to buy up toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and other related items. These are people who do this type of thing for a living, although usually it's buying up collectable items. Then they sell them online for large profits. It's capitalism, it's the American way. Except this time, there was a huge backlash against these folks because this time it was necessities that they were buying, not collectibles. We need to remember that there is a difference between what is allowed and what is right.

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

2Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

The gospels to one degree or another exonerate the Roman government for the death of Jesus. We should not be fooled. Much like the high priest and the elders, Rome had no desire for a new king of Judea to arise. The area was politically unstable as it was. So why do the gospels let Pontius Pilate off the hook? Because the people of the time knew their leaders were in the pocket of Rome, and by attacking their leaders and not Rome they were able to spread the word without too much fear of persecution (yet). Their leaders were told by the Romans to call for the

death of Jesus. In the end it was all about keeping control and power in the hands of the rich and influential. It would seem that today things haven't changed much.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." ' The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

According to the gospels this was quite the presentation. Crucifixion is one of the worst deaths possible. Many came to watch. Some to see the death of a threat, some for entertainment purposes or curiosity, and some because a loved one was dying. The gospels tend to gloss over the women that had such an important role in the ministry of Jesus. But I want to note that it was not just the twelve disciples who followed Jesus. There were women who cooked, cleaned, and even financially supported Jesus's ministry; after all, as he taught, he and the twelve weren't working second jobs.

Many of us have been at the side of a loved one as they died, but few if any of us have had to watch a loved one get executed. Not only that, but they thought it meant the end of their dreams and plans for a better world. This was not the way things were supposed to go.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise again.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, “He has been raised from the dead”, and the last deception would be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

The story would seem to be over. It is a tradition in many churches to strip the sanctuary after the Maundy Thursday service, and in some they even snuff out the Christ candle; for Christ has died and left the world. But we know how this story ends. We know that God is always with us and that there is still hope in the world, so I am going to relight this candle today. Because this year, maybe more so than others, we need to be reminded that God is still with us, that hope is still alive, and that next week we celebrate the most wonderful miracle the world will ever see. Amen