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First Sunday in Lent
John 11:45-53
February 18, 2018

In Christ Jesus, whose death was necessary that we might live, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

During these Sunday morning Lenten sermons we're going to hear about irony. One dictionary defines *irony* as "a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what . . . might be expected." Another states it is "a figure of speech in which the literal meaning is the opposite of the intended meaning." Jesus' passion is filled with irony---situations that are different from what you would expect. Today we are focusing on unintentional irony. Sometimes we do and say things that are ironic without even realizing it. This morning we have just such a situation before us. Caiaphas, the high priest, makes one of the clearest proclamations of the Gospel you'll ever find—and he never even realized it. His words are today's

IRONY OF THE PASSION:

IT IS BETTER THAT ONE MAN DIE FOR THE PEOPLE.

Caiaphas said this several weeks before Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem. The death of Christ was more than just a tragedy. Its significance goes far beyond the all-too-common realities of injustice and human cruelty. Caiaphas helps us to see what God had in mind. But Caiaphas was making a very different point.

IT IS BETTER THAT ONE MAN DIE FOR THE PEOPLE.

I: This shows the guilt of Jesus' enemies.

John tells us that many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary believed in Jesus because they saw what He did. Do you remember what Jesus had just done? He had just raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus told the bystanders to roll the stone away and then shouted, "**LAZARUS, COME FORTH!**" A man, dead for four days, came out of the tomb—alive. Many people saw that Jesus indeed had power over death, and so they believed in Him. There's no irony in that.

Yet John says, "**BUT SOME OF THEM WENT AWAY TO THE PHARISEES AND TOLD THEM THE THINGS JESUS DID.**" You'd think they would've been moved by seeing a dead man now alive. But all they could do was tattle on Jesus. Then the Pharisees called an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The council was divided between Pharisees and Sadducees, and they usually disagreed about everything. But now they spoke with one voice: "**WHAT SHALL WE DO? FOR THIS MAN WORKS MANY SIGNS. IF WE LET HIM ALONE LIKE THIS, EVERYONE WILL BELIEVE IN HIM, AND THE ROMANS WILL COME AND TAKE AWAY BOTH OUR PLACE AND NATION.**"

Jesus' enemies recognized that He was doing miracles. They didn't deny that Lazarus had been dead and now he was alive. They understood that Jesus had raised him from the dead. What was their response? Faith in Jesus? Trust in Him as the Messiah, the Christ? Praise to God!

No, just the opposite. "**Everybody's going to believe in him!**" they cried out in fear. They were terrified that Jesus was going to convert the whole nation of Israel to His Gospel!

They thought that would be a tragedy. They believed that would bring about the end of Israel's unique place in history. They couldn't imagine that their country could continue in those circumstances. But more than that, they feared for themselves. From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, these religious leaders had understood that Jesus was a threat to their authority. They claimed the right to interpret the Scriptures. But Jesus was constantly telling them they were wrong, that

their hearts were hard, that their religion of works was false. If they would lose their hold on the people, the Romans would get rid of them.

However, Caiaphas had a solution to their problem. He said, **"YOU KNOW NOTHING AT ALL, NOR DO YOU CONSIDER THAT IT IS EXPEDIENT FOR US THAT ONE MAN SHOULD DIE FOR THE PEOPLE, AND NOT THAT THE WHOLE NATION SHOULD PERISH."** That statement ended the discussion. From that time forward, they plotted to take Jesus' life. It was the only solution that made sense. Of course, it wasn't the only solution that made sense. The world is full of people who disagree with us, and many of them have much more influence on public opinion and even morals than we do. But we don't plot to kill them. If Jesus really were a false teacher, these men could have simply entrusted themselves to God and opposed His false teaching with the truth. But these teachers of Israel felt they had to kill Him.

Why did they reach that conclusion? It wasn't just hard politics. It was hatred. In the next chapter we learn they even plotted to kill Lazarus. That's how much they hated Jesus and His message. Where did that hatred come from? **Unbelief!** The Bible tells us that the sinful mind is God's enemy—and all unbelievers have sinful, hardened hearts and minds. Jesus Himself tells us that the world will hate us because it hated Him. This is simply the most concrete example of that truth. So in the face of Jesus' greatest miracle, His enemies determined to kill Him.

That's pretty ironic isn't it? But it may not seem like it has a great deal to do with us. After all, we don't hate Jesus. We believe the Son of God became man to take our sins away. That's why we're here today. But each of us has the seed of unbelief in our sinful hearts. Each of us has the pride of the Pharisees inside us, just waiting for an opportunity to spring up and crowd God out of our hearts and our lives. Even though we are churchgoing people, we aren't immune. The Pharisees were the churchgoing people of their day. They studied their Bibles regularly. They even taught in the synagogues.

However, behind the appearance of faith lay hearts that were dead and cold. What killed those hearts? Sinful human pride! Pride kills faith. Faith says, **"I need God to do everything for me."** Pride says, "I can do it all myself." If we constantly tell ourselves how good we are, how dedicated we are, how lucky our church is to have us, then, we're on the road to becoming Pharisees. If pride takes control of our hearts, hatred of the Gospel will ultimately take control too, although it will probably hide itself behind the image of concern for our church, for our traditions, or for our children.

Are we guilty of pride? Someone has said, "Pinch yourself." Did it hurt? Do you have flesh and blood? Then you are guilty of pride, because pride lives in the heart of every sinner. That sinful pride should carry us all down to hell. But pride is not the point John was making. Rather, the pride of these men became the means to an end—Jesus had to die in Jerusalem. That's why He came. God had determined to take the pride, hatred and unbelief

of these men and turn it into a Gospel blessing, a blessing for all people. Because Jesus let these men kill Him, our sin is paid for—even our sinful pride that lurks in our hearts—and we are forgiven. Because the Holy Spirit comes to us when we hear that Good News, God wages war against the pride in our hearts, day by day by day.

Ironic---Caiaphas proclaimed that very gospel of God even though all he intended to communicate was hatred and self-serving interests. But Caiaphas was not in control of events, God was. God really made this statement to us:

IT IS BETTER THAT ONE MAN DIE FOR THE PEOPLE.

II. This shows the love of God.

John says, **NOW THIS HE DID NOT SAY ON HIS OWN AUTHORITY; BUT BEING HIGH PRIEST THAT YEAR HE PROPHESED THAT JESUS WOULD DIE FOR THE NATION.** Caiaphas was unaware of what the Holy Spirit was doing through him. That's ironic because God had given the priesthood to point to Jesus. For 1,500 years the priests brought blood sacrifices to God to show that the Messiah would one day come and sacrifice Himself to pay for our sins. One last time, God spoke through the High Priest to close out the Old Covenant and bring an end to symbols and sacrifices and to replace them with their fulfillment. After this prophecy was fulfilled, the Old Testament priesthood would end. There was no more need for sacrifices. The office of prophet—that office of proclaiming what our High Priest would do—passed from the physical nation of Israel to the Christian church and the office of Priest has been given to all Christians to forgive sins in Jesus' name.

Ironic isn't it that Caiaphas, the High Priest who believed and taught the people that it was "every man for himself, you must do your best, you must atone for your own sins, you must be good enough to be accepted by God, by keeping the Law," proclaimed the purest Gospel **IT IS EXPEDIENT FOR US THAT ONE MAN SHOULD DIE FOR THE PEOPLE.**

When we examine our lives with God's unchangeable commands we clearly see that we have either done what we should not have done, or that we have not done what we should have done. Sins of commission and sins of omission fill our thoughts, our words and our actions. That sinful pride in our hearts is a universal human condition. All sinners have it. It condemns all of us to death and to hell. But God did not want that to happen. So He sent His Son to die and pay for our pride. Jesus came as the true High Priest that Israel was waiting for and offered the only blood that could ever pay for our sins, the only blood that could ever turn God's anger away from us, the only blood that could ever make us friends with God again—His own blood, the blood of the God-man.

Jesus' blood—the blood of God—is priceless! So it paid for so much more than just the nation of Israel, as John continues, **"...AND NOT FOR THAT NATION ONLY, BUT ALSO THAT HE WOULD GATHER TOGETHER IN ONE THE CHILDREN OF GOD WHO WERE SCATTERED ABROAD."** God always planned to save us Gentiles. Caiaphas unknowingly prophesied that Jesus would die for the whole world, for every man, woman, and child who would ever live.

As far as we know, Caiaphas never understood what he said that day. So when he died, he went to hell in one last sad bit

of irony. The High Priest of God, prophesying of the Messiah, but not believing in the Messiah.

Thank God that the Holy Spirit has revealed that heavenly wisdom to us so that we know the real necessity to Christ's death. Yes, it was expedient, it was necessary that ONE, Christ, should die so that we sinners and the whole world of sinners would be saved. Believe that and you have eternal life.

The great irony of the passion is God's unending, undeniable love. He declared that eternal love even through the mouth of an unbeliever.

Amen.