

Apr.6, 2014 - Jesus Condemned
John 19:1-16a

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This week I'm asking you to do something that might seem both odd and difficult. I'm asking you to identify with the Jewish authorities. You spoke their words during the reading of this Gospel text.

Here's the state you're in: You find yourself between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, you don't relish having to work, cooperate, and sometimes kowtow to the Romans. But you really don't have much choice. So you have some sympathy for the revolutionaries who arise from time to time. But you also know their efforts are pretty much hopeless (resistance is futile) and bring only grief. So you believe cooperating with the Roman occupiers to stamp them out is the right thing for your people.

That's the context in which Jesus shows up on your doorstep. Of all the Gospels, John does the best job of getting inside the heads of the Jewish leaders and explaining their actions in ways that to me that are pretty sympathetic. Which is ironic considering that John's community is dealing with having been thrown out of their synagogues and that's John's Gospel has been used in Europe to justify persecution of Jews.

So, here's what John sees inside your head now that you have identified yourself with these Jewish leaders. He sees that you are between that rock and a hard place when it comes to Jesus. Some of you are quite sympathetic. One of you, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus at night to hear his teaching. One of you, Joseph of Arimathea, will donate a new grave in which to lay Jesus after his crucifixion.

You're divided among yourselves. Most of Jesus' teaching seems right to you. And yet you hear him deliver these "I am sayings," and you know that I Am is the divine name which is too holy even to be spoken aloud. And that's blasphemy.

You also know that Jesus has quite a following. And you're worried about that. You see where this will lead. As your leader, Caiaphas says, "Everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy our Holy Place and our nation."

Are you going to let that happen? No. You have principles. And they are good principles. Caiaphas said it well, "It is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish."

Most weeks we pray for world leaders. Sometimes we do so by name. We'll be doing that today. And what do we pray for? That their judgements would be just, especially for the poor and powerless. We could pray for the rich and powerful, too. Nothing wrong with that. It's just that the rich and powerful can pretty much take care of themselves.

Now, most everybody, even the worst of the world's leaders, at the very least pays lip service to justice for the poor and powerless. But more often than not, the poor and powerless continue to get the short end of the stick. God's universe bends toward justice; but we run the world to bend toward power. World leaders need our prayers.

So do we. Our principles, like those of the Jewish leaders, are good. In a better world, we would have no need to compromise them. But this is not a better world. What the Jewish leaders do that is wrong is compromise their integrity. And in sacrificing their integrity, they sacrifice Jesus. "We have a law, and according to that law he must die." Yes. Jesus is claiming to be the Son of God. And that's blasphemy—unless it's true.

Pilate, too, is caught. He finds no fault in Jesus. But when the leaders say to him, "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar," he knows that if he releases Jesus, this will get back to Caesar, and he might lose his job. So he brings Jesus out to them and says, "Shall I crucify your King?" and they respond, "We have no king but Caesar," that is, "We have no king but the emperor who claims to be a god." A really hard thing for good Jew to say. Integrity goes out the window. Who now is blaspheming?

Why does Jesus die? Because deeply flawed human beings wanted to get their way and used otherwise good principles to justify their actions. That's the human answer. The divine answer is that Jesus dies to make the fullness of God's love known.

This week, when we pray for world leaders, we will also pray for ourselves. Because we don't live in that better world. We will pray that we keep our integrity and that our lives, our actions, and our very being show forth the fullness of God's love.