

## Condemned by the Righteous

The flames of the torches coming from the city and across the Kidron Valley could be seen from the Garden of the Gethsemane, and Jesus, rather than seeking to hide from the coming events, awaited the cohort that was coming to arrest him. They were led by one of his own – Judas Iscariot – who had sat in a place of honor at the supper they had shared only hours earlier. Now, for 30 pieces of silver, a typical price paid for a slave, Judas was betraying the one who had given him the pathway to life. He chose a different road.

Now, they led Jesus along the road back into the city, past the Golden Gate where Jesus triumphantly entered into the city and could have rallied the crowds for a massive overthrow, past the pinnacle of the temple where Satan had tempted Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, through the lower city and up the stepped roadway to the palatial home of the high priest, Caiaphas. Today, a church has been built over the site, but below the church there are remnants of stables, which only the very richest people would have, and there is a dungeon where Jesus would have been put while awaiting the gathering of the ruling council of the temple, the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin was comprised of 70 elders plus the chief priest, modeled after the 70 elders God commanded Moses to gather together in Numbers 11: 17, where God spoke saying,

*I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.*

The Sanhedrin was the collective group whom God would direct and lead so that they, in turn, might lead the people. These were the leaders of the temple, the faithful, righteous leaders of Israel. These were the intermediaries between God and the people, those who offered the sacrifices for atonement and thanksgiving. They were viewed by all as the righteous leaders of the nation: faithful, law abiding, upstanding leaders of the Jews.

But Jesus referenced the seventy as well, as recorded in Luke 10.

*After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest . . .”*

Great power was placed in the hands of the seventy sent out by Jesus not by the law, but by the Holy Spirit. These seventy were sent out to give away the gospel, and returned having experienced an unexpected power: *The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”* Such is the power that Jesus offered.

But it was not the Holy Spirit, but the law that placed great power and authority in the hands of the Sanhedrin. Their interest was not in sharing or giving away anything, but in preserving power, maintaining the status quo, all in the name of righteousness. We cannot

forget, these were the good guys, and only the gospels painted them otherwise. These were the religious, spiritual leaders in whom the people had placed their trust.

So why would the righteous leaders guided by the law and custom permit so many irregularities in this trial:

- This trial was held at night, hastily put together at the house of Caiaphas, the high priest. Trials were never held in the night, and would have been in the public forum of the temple courts, not the high priest's house.
- This trial was held at the time of the Passover, which was highly unusual as the festival days were not thought of as a time to administer justice
- In spite of the commandment against false witness, these leaders brought forth witnesses who lied, who could not get their story straight, and in direct conflict with Jewish law, condemned Jesus without two corroborating witnesses.

The gospel account also tells us that there were two members of the ruling council who did not agree, and yet they remained silent. One was Joseph of Arimathea and the other Nicodemus. Both of these men will play a significant role in hours to come in which their true feelings were silenced.

So why were these 71 so quick to abandon their principles and tarnish their reputation as fair and righteous men? Most likely, the answer lies in a single word: fear. They were fearful of the power of Jesus to change and transform lives. They were fearful of losing control, having watched the masses welcome Jesus on the previous Sunday. At least two were fearful of what their peers would say were they to stand up for what they knew was right.

This part of the story is about more than the fear of the Sanhedrin and the followers of Jesus. It is a story about the human condition. Fear is a means of self-preservation, which is not always bad. Fear of harm can keep us from putting ourselves into dangerous places where we ought not to be. But fear can also cause us to turn our back on the foundational principles of our faith. Fear can cause us to remain silent in the face of evil. Fear caused Christians in Europe to remain silent as the Nazi regime massacred millions of Jews and others. Fear permitted people of faith to accommodate racist segregation in this country and others around the world. Fear prevents us from saying, "this is wrong," when we know it's not popular, and so we remain silent. How many times have you or I seen something that we know is wrong and failed to speak up, afraid of what others might think of us? I'm not talking about those who find it necessary to point out everyone else's sins, except their own – they're just obnoxious. I'm talking about speaking out against personal and systemic injustice: injustice that allows persons to be bought and sold in a modern day slave trade, injustice that permits one part of the human family to become rich on the backs of the poor and powerless, injustice that uses human law to oppress members of God's family.

Apart from fear of losing power or control, Jesus' own words brought fear into the hearts of the 71, and ours as well. When asked directly, "Are you the Messiah?" Jesus answers, "I am." In the book of Exodus, when Moses asks God for his name, God answer "Yahweh," or "I am." Jesus' answer is more than just an answer to the question, Jesus is claiming for himself the name of God, and he goes on to identify himself with the images of the messiah as found in the book of Daniel when he goes on to state, "And you will see the Son of Man

seated at the right hand of power coming with the clouds of heaven.” Jesus knew the members of the ruling council would know the reference from the prophecies. He knew that the reference to sitting at the right hand of power delineated a unique relationship that he had with God. This was not a political, military messiah standing before them. This was a messiah who would redefine their whole understanding of God and their faith.

Rethinking our own relationship to God is not easy, especially when we have already put God into a nice, neat box that fits our world-view and comfort zone. In fact, we often resist. But Jesus came to demonstrate for us God is not a distant, impassionate judge: God is a loving presence in our daily lives. God is not so concerned with our forms of worship, the hymns we sing, or the types of prayers we pray, but with our willingness to surrender ourselves in grateful thanksgiving in worship and praise. God is not so concerned with the knowledge of the Bible that we gather for ourselves, but in how we use that to bless others in the world. In other words, when we proceed with the spirit of fear, we will become like the Sanhedrin and turn away from the ways of Jesus. But when we proceed with the Spirit of generosity, as we witness with the seventy whom Jesus sent out, and which is radically demonstrated in Jesus’ giving himself over to the “righteous” of his day, we are living in the likeness of the Savior himself who came to serve and not to be served, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The trial of Jesus was paralleled with a second trial – far less formal, yet eerily familiar. So pivotal is this part of the story that it is included in all four gospels. Jesus stood in the palace halls while Simon Peter stood in the outer courtyard. As Jesus was being tried, Peter was being challenged. “You were with Jesus, the Galilean,” the servant girl says, and then she says to others, “I’m sure he’s one of them.” Finally, a little later, a bystander confronts him a third time, “This man is one of them.” Each time, Peter denies even knowing Jesus. He allowed fear to rule. In spite of his protests at the last supper, he does exactly what Jesus predicts he’ll do: he denies him, and the cock crows for the second time. Luke even tells us that at that moment, Jesus turns to look Peter right in the eye. Peter stood self-condemned. He was not condemned by Jesus, not by the righteous, but by his own fear.

When have you or I denied Jesus out of fear? When have we put aside what Jesus calls us to do because it’s too difficult or complicated to stand for what is right? When have we stood silent when our voices needed to be heard, or when have we chosen to follow our peers, our politics, or even our religious customs rather than the way of Jesus? When have we stood in the outer courtyard denying our relationship with Jesus by our thoughts, our words or our actions, knowing full well that Jesus is willingly standing trial, taking upon himself the sins of the world?

(Silence – crow of the rooster)