

Instead of Me

Message #5 – “Accused for Me”
Matthew 26:57-68 and 27:11-14

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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26:57 Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. ⁵⁸ But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

⁵⁹ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. ⁶⁰ But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward ⁶¹ and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’”

*⁶² Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” ⁶³ But **Jesus remained silent.** The high priest said to him, “**I charge you under oath by the living God:** Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”*

⁶⁴ “You have said so,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

*⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “**He has spoken blasphemy!** Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What do you think?”*

“He is worthy of death,” they answered.

*⁶⁷ Then **they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him** ⁶⁸ and said, “Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?”*

^{27:11} Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“You have said so,” Jesus replied.

*¹² When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” ¹⁴ But **Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge**—to the great amazement of the governor.*

(Matthew 26:57-68; 27:11-14)

Seventy-one to one.

The odds were stacked against Him. Seventy-one to one.

After His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was taken to the Jewish high priest and He was put on trial before the Sanhedrin.

A little bit of background . . . The Sanhedrin was the Jewish high court – their “supreme court.” In Greek, “Sanhedrin” literally means, “sitting together.” They were the ruling council -- made up of 71 members -- seventy of the top Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests within all of Judaism, along with the appointed high priest. At the time, that high priest was Joseph ben Caiaphas.

Normally, the Sanhedrin would meet in a special room in the Temple in Jerusalem, a room called the "Chamber of the Hewn Stones." (Sounds like something out of an Indiana Jones movie, right?) Well, this ruling council would hear court cases and examine situations regarding the daily life and faith of the Jewish people -- in some ways, much like our own Supreme Court would today. The Sanhedrin had certain rules that governed how they deliberated their cases, especially when such cases warranted the serious consideration of the death penalty.

In Matthew 26:57, we read that Jesus was taken to Caiaphas, the high priest – but, it also says that "*the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled.*" What this means is that a special, informal meeting of the Sanhedrin had been called in the middle of the night, probably around midnight, with the sole purpose of interrogating Jesus. Because these were unusual circumstances, they actually met at Caiaphas' house instead of their special room in the Temple. It was here, in Caiaphas' home, within this emergency session of the Sanhedrin, that the accusations against Jesus were leveled. This session was highly unusual. In fact, some biblical scholars believe that it was clandestine enough to be considered illegal by their own rules. Officially, though, they would meet again at daybreak to pronounce their formal judgment against Jesus. But right now, during this late hour of the night, this is where the Sanhedrin actually imposed its power where Jesus was concerned. And there, in this makeshift meeting of midnight madness, those religious leaders set up a mock trial that would rival anything you might see on the Jerry Springer Show.

What exactly were the charges they had against Jesus? Most of their accusations had accrued over the course of the three years of Jesus's ministry. In their opinion...

- First, Jesus **broke the Sabbath laws** – repeatedly – especially by healing people on the Sabbath day. Certainly, Jesus's miraculous healings dumbfounded the religious leaders. But rather than attributing such miracles to God's divine intervention, they condemned Jesus for doing such healings on the Sabbath in violation of the Jewish law. They simply could not conceive of any way that God would operate outside of their predetermined frame of thinking.
- Second, they accused Jesus of **sedition** – stirring up the crowds by what He taught in ways that challenged the Jewish leaders. In the presence of the crowds, Jesus had called the religious leaders "blind guides" and "hypocrites." Was that sedition? Or was Jesus simply calling those leaders to account?
- Third, they accused Jesus of **threatening to destroy the Temple**. According to John 2:19, what Jesus actually said to the religious leaders was, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*" (ESV).
- Fourth, they accused Jesus of **being aligned with the devil** – that He was casting out demons by the power of Satan. This accusation was bolstered by how they observed Jesus eating with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors – and how he hung out with lepers.
- But by far the clearest accusation that they made against Jesus was that of **blasphemy** – specifically, that Jesus called Himself the Son of God and claimed to be the Messiah. Blasphemy was an act of disrespect or dishonor directly against God – and the Jewish law took that very seriously. In fact, according to **Leviticus 24:13-16**, the punishment for blasphemy was to be death by stoning.

Normally, the Sanhedrin would use this time to interrogate the accused, explore the validity of the charges – and when appropriate, take several days to reflect on any decisions for capital punishment.ⁱ Yet it seemed that by the time Jesus had arrived at the home of the high priest that night, the Sanhedrin had already made up its mind about Jesus's guilt. And, even though it

was a quickly called meeting, it seems as if they already had a list of witnesses who would give testimony to Jesus's charges. Look at what it says in **Matthew 26:59-60** –

*⁵⁹ The chief priests and **the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.** ⁶⁰ But **they did not find any,** though many false witnesses came forward.*

Clearly, it was a frustrating night for them. Here, their nemesis was finally in front of them – betrayed into their hands by one of Jesus's own disciples – and they didn't have sufficient evidence to back up their charges. Jesus was, in fact, innocent of their false accusations and they were desperate to prove otherwise.

Have you ever been falsely accused of a crime?

Sadly, it happens way too often. So much so that there actually are quite a few websites that describe what you're supposed to do if you become falsely accused of a crime. Listen to the advice of one of those websitesⁱⁱ...

If you're falsely accused of a crime, you should –

- Hire a really good lawyer – especially an experienced criminal defense attorney who has handled similar cases as yours.
- Remember that even though you're innocent, you can't assume that the police, prosecutor, judge, or jury will necessarily agree with you. Even though by law, you are innocent until proven guilty, you will need to build your case to prove your innocence.
- Realize that proving your innocence will cost you a lot – financially, physically and emotionally. It will take a lot out of you and your family.
- Gather as much evidence as possible to clarify your innocence. You need to collect any documentation that may help you, such as correspondence, emails, receipts, GPS data, or other information to prove where you were when the crime was committed.
- Obtain supporting witnesses and their contact information to add weight to your defense.

So, in the middle of the night, the religious leaders gathered false witness after false witness and marched them into the room – each offering testimony. . . sometimes testimonies that contradicted the testimonies of other witnesses (according to Mark's Gospel) – and yet nothing was offered that was sufficient to obtain their ultimate goal: charges that would sustain the death penalty.

And in response to all of these accusations, Jesus simply remained silent.

He had no defense attorney. He had no documentation, emails, receipts or GPS records to prove His whereabouts. And He had no one present in the room who would offer character references on His behalf.

It was 71 to 1.

Or, more accurately, it was probably 69 to 1. In the room at the time most likely were two of those religious leaders that had a different slant on who Jesus was—namely, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Nicodemus was the Pharisee that had approached Jesus at night and had a life-changing conversation with Him about being "born again" (John 3). And according to Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:50-56, Joseph of Arimathea was "*a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God*" and "*had not consented to [the council's]*

decision and action” against Jesus. We know from later in the gospel accounts that both of these men would go to the Roman governor and obtain permission to take Jesus’s body down from the cross after His death, and they, too, would be responsible for burying Him.

But at the time of this special meeting, even if they, in fact, spoke up to defend Jesus – which would have been a very risky move on their part – they would have been summarily overruled by the majority.

Clearly, with the exception of those two, the Sanhedrin as a whole was united in their animosity of Jesus. So, in frustration, the high priest calls on Jesus to respond to the accusations by demanding that He submit to a legally binding oath found in the Jewish law (Leviticus 5:1) that states that if anyone fails to speak when asked to testify, it will be considered a sin and they will be held responsible accordingly. Look at verse 63:

*“The high priest said to him, ‘**I charge you under oath by the living God:** Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’”*

So, Jesus breaks His silence and says, in verse 64,

⁶⁴ “You have said so . . . But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

I’m thinking that if Jesus would have had a defense attorney, that defense attorney would have been cringing in that moment.

But there are two things here that are important to note about Jesus’s response: First, by His response, we see that Jesus defined Himself apart from the religious leaders’ agenda. Even when faced with accusations, He was not concerned with defending Himself. He was not trying to clear His reputation. He was not trying to counter their verbal attacks. He was not even trying to point out the discrepancies in the testimonies of the false witnesses. Jesus had a totally different agenda. He had a totally different mission. He knew that His destiny was set and that His suffering, crucifixion and death were part of the plan for the redemption of humanity. His silence was not fear—it was patience ... as the histrionic drama of this mock trial revealed yet further evidence of why Jesus needed to die for the sins of humanity.

Secondly, Jesus’s response also asserts His ultimate position of authority and honor. “*From now on,*” Jesus says, “*you will see the Son of Man sitting **at the right hand of the Mighty One** and coming on the clouds of heaven.*”

In biblical language, the “**right hand of God**” was the place of highest honor, a position of greatest strength, might, power, authority, and worthiness. Also, in using the phrase, “*coming on the clouds of heaven,*” Jesus was referencing imagery from the Old Testament book of **Daniel 7:13-14** – in which the prophet Daniel says...

*¹³ “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, **coming with the clouds of heaven.** He approached the Ancient of Days [a term that refers to Almighty God] and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

By using this reference, Jesus was indicating that a day would be coming when Jesus would return to execute judgment – and those religious leaders would see that judgment day. His statement marked what would become a reversal of roles: right now, the Sanhedrin was in the role of judge and jury over Jesus in a mock trial built on false accusations; but a day would be coming when the roles would be reversed, and Jesus would be both Judge and Jury -- and truth would expose all to the light of Christ's authority.

Well, Jesus's response certainly had its impact. In verses 65-68, we read –

*⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "**He has spoken blasphemy!** Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What do you think?"*

*"He is worthy of death," they answered. ⁶⁷ Then **they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him** ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophesy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"*

The behavior of these religious leaders says a lot . . . about them. Rather than weeping at the prospects of the death penalty for another human being -- a fellow Jew -- those religious leaders, in mob-like fashion, abuse Jesus, mock Him, disrespect Him, bully Him, and self-righteously condemn the very one who was born to set them free from their sin.

So, they condemn Jesus to death. Sixty-nine to one.

There's just one problem. Under the rule of the Roman Empire, the Jewish people do not have the ability to execute anyone. Only the Roman government does. And the charges against Jesus – especially the charge of blasphemy -- were religious in nature. The Roman government wouldn't care about them. What good is a death sentence if you're not able to carry it out?

So, the Sanhedrin created yet another charge that *would* get the attention of the Roman governor– the charge of treason. The governor, Pontius Pilate, would not care about Jesus proclaiming Himself to be the Son of God, but stirring up trouble in Jerusalem by proclaiming Himself to be the "King of the Jews" – that was a different story. For the Sanhedrin? – Going to the Roman governor was the best option for them. Since one of Jesus's own disciples had betrayed Him, they could actually get the Roman officials to condemn Him to death – and that would prevent the religious leaders from having to bear any of the responsibility for Jesus's death. So, the Sanhedrin appealed to the Roman governor, sending Jesus to Pilate with a political charge in order to pursue the death penalty.

For those of us who know the story, we know that in all of his interrogations of Jesus, Pontius Pilate repeatedly does not find enough evidence to convict Jesus of the drummed-up charge. In fact, there's every indication that Pilate sees right through the ploys of the Sanhedrin and realizes that he's being used to carry out their agenda. Yet, even as we experience in today's world, politics has many levels, many triangles, and many bedfellows. Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent, in fact he proclaims Him as being innocent in both **John 18:38** and **19:4**. Yet, he succumbs to the political pressures – both external and internal – and ultimately condemns Jesus to be crucified.

Jesus **bore the accusations** of the religious leaders.

He **bore the accusations** of the political leaders.

He **bore the accusations** of the crowds of people who had become disillusioned in the systems – both religious as well as political -- that were supposed to give them freedom.

He **bore the accusations** of the generations of Jews who had put their hope in a military messiah that would conquer their Roman oppressors.

And in that moment in time, Jesus **bore the accusations** of the many who would accuse Him in the two thousand years since that mock trial because they were expecting God to be something else.

Jesus was accused . . . instead of you, instead of me.

Yet, before we totally throw the Sanhedrin under the proverbial bus, it makes me wonder . . .

Who do I tend to accuse — and why? What *type* of person do I seem to always accuse — Democrats? Republicans? Blacks? Whites? Gay People? Straight People? Mask-wearers? People who refuse to wear masks? ... Jersey drivers? Do I ever make up charges against other people just to get my way, or to get even, or just to divert responsibility away from myself?

What we learn from these ancient Jewish religious leaders is that **our accusations always say more about us than they do about the person we're accusing.**

So, what do our accusations say about us?

Now, there are legitimate accusations. There are people who do bad things, people who offend us, people whom we offend — both intentionally and unintentionally. There are times when we need to call people to account for their actions and for their words... and times when we have to be called out ourselves. Accountability is a good thing, right? Yet, how we go about holding others accountable still says a lot more about us than it does about the person we're accusing.

So many of our accusations, however, involve *false* witnessing against our neighbors, our spouses, our parents, our children, our friends, even our enemies — made perhaps in moments of immediate vulnerability, pain or fear. Such accusations perhaps reveal initially an anger that we feel, a desire for revenge or a desire to exert power or control over those that we disagree with or don't like. Perhaps we intentionally make up charges to purposefully get them into trouble or to make them pay for something they did to us—recently or even thirty years ago. Or perhaps as we engage in mental sparring, we create an altered reality in which the other person really *is* guilty of what we are falsely accusing them of — so that we might justify our actions and, like the Sanhedrin, claim neutrality even though we, ourselves, are participants in the fault.

Whether or not we want to admit it, the truth remains: **our accusations always say more about us than they do about the person we're accusing.**

That's why Jesus taught His disciples that in order for them to take the speck of dust out of another person's eye they had to remove the log from their own (**Matthew 7:5**). "*Judge not,*" Jesus said, "*lest you be judged -- by the same measure that you are using to judge the other person*" (**Matthew 7:1-2**).

What do our accusations say about us?

I don't know about you, but I'm so thankful... humbled and thankful... for the cross of Christ, and for all that Jesus endured on our behalf. I'm thankful for the cross because it reminds me that at the foot of the cross, I stand equally in need of God's forgiveness, of God's grace, as any other person that has offended me.

**At the foot of the cross of Christ, we're all equal –
equal in our need for God's grace.**

You see, Jesus died for the sins of *all* people – your sins as well as mine.

And one day, along with all of those who falsely accuse us – we will see Jesus “*sitting on the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.*” And all will be exposed to the wonderful Light of God's Truth.

Let's pray our prayer together: **Lord, what do You need me to see, what do You need me to hear, what do You need me to know, what do You need me to do? I am your servant in Jesus's name. Amen.**

ⁱ See <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/god/who-is-jesus/reasons-trial-of-jesus-illegal/>

ⁱⁱ For example, see <https://www.browninglonglaw.com/library/how-to-handle-being-falsely-accused-of-a-crime.cfm>