

“From Blame to Blessing” (A Dramatic Sermon)

Matthew 21:1-11

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I know what you’re thinking - this is a marvelous day! It’s like a trip to the Final Four with your team doing well... only this time things will not end well. You know where the story is going. It’s like watching *Titanic*. Everyone welcomes Jesus into town with palm branches waving and shouts of Hosanna. But this ship is going down. Things will turn dark quickly. There’s no need to get your hopes up.

Oh, there is good news on the other side of the cross. There is an empty tomb and all that it implies. But still, you wonder – couldn’t things turn out another way? Does he really have to die? What might need to change? Who might need to change? And most of all, who is to blame for things going so wrong after seeming so right?

There are plenty of possibilities. You might start with the Jews or the Jewish leaders. Many Christians have over the years. Don’t “they” put him to death? Doesn’t this same crowd that welcomes Jesus to town shout crucify in a few days? Well, no, and not really.

I mean, some Jewish people are against Jesus, as are some Jewish leaders. But not all Jewish people, not even most. Jesus himself is Jewish, as are all of us who follow him in this time. And the crowd that gathers today is not the same crowd that shouts crucify. That’s just one of those urban legends, one of those ancient urban legends.

Don’t get me wrong - some Pharisees and Sadducees play a role in all of this. But they don’t have the authority to do Jesus in and they do not represent all Jews. Do your leaders always speak for you?

I’ll tell you who does have the authority – the Romans! Maybe they are the ones you should blame. I know Pilate does his best to say it’s not his fault, like some first-century Han Solo. He washes his hands and releases a real criminal - Barabbas. But give me a break! Pilate innocent? Really?! Trust me, he has the authority, he has the power, to do whatever he wants, and he is no saint by any measure.

But you don't have to take my word for it. Various historians, like Philo and Josephus, paint a picture of him that is not pretty. He is accused of everything from simple blunders to robbery and murder. The Gospel of Luke (13:1) refers to a time when his soldiers slaughter some Galileans with their sacrifices.

Some of the Gospel writers portray him in a somewhat sympathetic fashion, more so than they do me, that's for sure. You'll have to decide which news source, if any, you consider to be trustworthy. But of one thing I can assure you - Pilate doesn't bat an eye at the prospect of stringing up another Jew. If some Jewish leaders get part of the blame, Pilate gets at least as much.

But let's not stop here. There is much more blame to go around. Jesus chooses to come to Jerusalem, knowing how volatile things are. You could argue that he is asking for trouble, though many theologians argue that this is God's plan all along. There is no other way to salvation. Jesus has to die for our sins. So, it's God's fault. The Devil doesn't make us do it. God does!

But while all of these possibilities may intrigue you, I know who you really want to blame – me! Oh yea, I've heard it all. I am the one who betrays him. How can I do that? How can I follow the man for three years, live and breathe every word he teaches, watch him heal people, feed the hungry, give sight to the blind, even bring Lazarus back to life... and then give him up?

I don't know... I realize I am an obvious scapegoat. Different Gospel writers try to explain my behavior as being motivated by greed or something else, though a community connected to me actually writes its own Gospel. There is a Gospel of Judas, believe it or not, you might consider it an alt-Gospel... I come off a little better there.

But I can tell you I am not motivated by greed or anything evil. I love the man more than life itself... If I'm trying to put the best face on my actions, maybe I'm trying to force his hand, get him to stand up to the Romans, like a real Messiah should. I realize you take those suffering servant passages in Isaiah and apply them to Jesus. He is the one who lays down his life for his friends. We know those passages too; they just don't describe the Messiah.

The Messiah is a great Ruler like King David. The Messiah will come to deliver us from oppression, real world oppression, something we have plenty of. Jesus can do this, I know he can; maybe if I force his hand and turn him over the Romans... maybe... Maybe this is my thought process, and maybe I'm just too stubborn to listen, even to Jesus, I don't know. All I can tell you is that I do not intend for things to play out the way they do. I want him alive, not dead. I love him as a teacher and a friend. And so, when it happens, I am devastated.

Surely you can identify with my experience. Whether your thinking is clear or not, you say or do something, you have no ill motives, but things turn out badly and you feel horrible. Well, I feel more than horrible. You know this part of the story too. I simply cannot forgive myself. I don't know whether Jesus can or not, but even if he can, I don't want him to. Believe me, you cannot hate me any more than I hate myself. It's why I end up taking my own life...

Some say this is an unforgiveable sin, but this is another urban legend. Nowhere does scripture identify suicide as unforgiveable. The only sin identified as unforgiveable is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which is basically recognizing who God is, yet still rejecting God. God does not coerce love. God will not force a gift into a closed fist. We have to open our hand to receive it. So, to say this sin is unforgivable is a kind of tautology. We cannot receive what we refuse to receive.

God does not coerce love, but God does offer love to all and surely God understands the brokenness that leads to self-hatred and self-harm. God forgives our every sin. Jesus extends compassion to everyone. So, why not me? I may not be able to forgive myself, and I may not think Jesus can forgive me, but I am probably wrong about this.

A great theologian of your time, a man named Karl Barth, includes more than fifty pages about me in his multi-volume *Church Dogmatics*. He concludes that I am undoubtedly a disciple of Jesus just like Peter and John. My problem, he says, is that I cannot seem to forgive myself or even believe that Jesus can forgive me. Then, he adds, "But we are terrible judges of ourselves, and that's not our job." We are terrible judges of ourselves... and that's not our job... Indeed. If only I could have figured this out sooner.

So, go ahead, blame me. Blame the Jewish leaders, the Romans, Jesus himself and God, but blame me too. In fact, blame me most of all. For goodness sakes, I blame myself, and that's what the church has done for ages, and for good reason. The more you focus on me, the less you have to look at yourself.

All twelve of us disciples betray Jesus, just in different ways. Peter denies even knowing him. We all disappear when it comes time for the cross, all but a few women. But I'm the one who gets the blame. You do it to this day. I'm the one who makes everyone else look good. As Carlyle Marney once said, "If Jesus dies for the sins of the world, Judas dies for the sins of the church."

But somewhere deep down you know this just isn't right, this doesn't really work, because you know, you *know* we all have some skin in this game, we all share some responsibility. We all oppose Jesus somewhere along the line, like the Pharisees and Sadducees. We all have the power to help Christ in some way, like Pilate, but often refuse to use it. We all betray Jesus, if not with our words, with our silence; if not with our actions, with our lack of action.

It's why in the film *Selma* Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. says what he does after an unarmed twenty-six-year-old African-American Baptist deacon is killed by an Alabama State Trooper. "Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?" he asks, "Every white lawman who abuses the law to terrorize. Every white politician who feeds on prejudice and hatred. Every white preacher who preaches the Bible and stays silent before his white congregation... Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?" Dr. King continues, "Every negro man and woman who stands by without joining this fight as their brothers and sisters are brutalized, humiliated, and ripped from this earth."

You might ask a similar question about the suffering in Syria or the treatment of refugees. You might ask a similar question about gun violence or the poverty that still haunts this world. Who is to blame for all of these things? We all are directly or indirectly. No one is completely innocent, no one is without sin. So, when we ask the question about Jesus on this day – who is to blame for this sweet story turning sour? The answer is – all of us, all of us!

And that is a far better conclusion than simply blaming me or the Jews or the Romans. But it is still not the conclusion we need to reach. For while we all share some responsibility for the suffering that lies ahead for Jesus, this day isn't really about blame. It's about hope and joy. It's about grace and peace. It's about our experience of being blessed by God no matter what is going on in our lives.

How do we reach this conclusion? Well, even though we are all to blame, Jesus loves us anyway. Even though we may think we are beyond any hope of forgiveness, God forgives us anyway. Even though we may judge ourselves in a negative and damning way, we are terrible judges of ourselves, and that's not our job anyway; it's God's. That's cause for hope and joy; that's cause for celebration!

I realize some of you may question my perspective. What makes me think Jesus could forgive me? I understand the question, but here is how I approach it now. Jesus forgives the very people who are putting him to death, while they are putting him to death. I have heard it from several reliable witnesses. He says, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34)."

Therein lies my hope, and yours, not in this one statement, but in the way it reveals the heart of Christ. This is the Jesus I know and love. This is a man who extends compassion to everyone. This is a man who loves outcasts. So, it seems only natural that he does in death what he does in life. He extends love to everyone and makes forgiveness available to those who need it most. It's why he comes into town in the first place. It's why he keeps taking one step after another toward the cross. He humbles himself and becomes obedient unto death, even death on a cross, as one last way of extending mercy to us all.

We should have realized when he had us get that donkey that this wasn't going to be your usual victory parade. A conquering king rides into town on a great stallion, not a donkey. But can a king forgive you of your darkest betrayal? Can a king transform your self-hatred? Can a king get you to quit blaming yourself and others and even God, and start soaking in the blessings of life? Jesus can, I know he can. That's what we ought to be thinking about today, not whom to blame, but whom to thank. We know whom, we know.