

Pastor Joe Polzin  
 Mark 14:1-2, 53-65  
 “Eyes on Jesus – *Murderous Eyes*”  
 Year A – Midweek Lent 4  
 March 25, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

We’re probably all familiar with the expression, “If looks could kill.” Can you picture someone’s eyes filled with anger? Likely you’ve seen it in the eyes of another person, and perhaps you’ve even imagined it on your own face. Whether we’re talking about the ancient world or modern times, so much can be expressed in the way we physically look at something or someone.

And that’s what I think of when I try to imagine the eyes of the chief priests and scribes, the Sadducees and Pharisees, as they plotted Jesus’ death in today’s Passion Reading. They had been filled with such hatred and murder as they watched Jesus greeted with praise in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And even before that, as we heard in our Second Reading, when they had been face-to-face with Jesus, they heard him speak woes and reproaches upon them. I’m sure if looks really could kill, at that point, theirs would have.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” said Jesus (Matthew 23:29). This kind of talking probably isn’t the best diplomatic approach by Dale Carnegie standards. But it was what the scribes and Pharisees needed to hear. Those stern words from Jesus were spoken as a parent does when disciplining a child. God and his representatives never speak the harsh word of the Law out of hate, but rather out of love, because it’s necessary that we recognize our sin, and know when we need to repent.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” said Jesus. “For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (Matthew 23:29–33).

These are some of the most pointed and condemning words Jesus ever speaks. But Jesus is confronting sin, and not only that, but he is confronting the scribes and the Pharisees who masquerade their sin for their own personal honor. Instead, Jesus points out the blood on their own hands. Jesus wants them to recognize their rank hypocrisy. Jesus wants them to repent.

So, he challenges them, saying, “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.” And he says this in order to bring them face-to-face with the anger and murder that lay within their own hearts. They were hiding under pious pretenses of honoring the prophets and behind pious platitudes of, “Well, we wouldn’t have done what our fathers did.” But Jesus knew differently. He’s saying to them, “I know your hearts. I can see the murder in your eyes. Go ahead! Walk in the steps of your fathers. I know you are going to kill me too and continue the family tradition!”

“There is nothing new under the sun,” said the Preacher in Ecclesiastes. Murderous thoughts and looks are as old as our Fall into sin. Cain’s downcast eyes became murderous toward his brother. The cause of murder is always the agency of man, but the original source is the devil, who, Jesus says, was a liar and murderer from the beginning. The Apostle John says in our First Reading that the murderer Cain “was of the evil one” (1 John 3:12). And in addressing the Jews who wanted to kill him, Jesus identifies Satan as the father of all who hate God’s Son.

And so, as we approach Holy Week this Lenten Season, and as we work our way through our Passion Readings during these Wednesday services, we aren’t surprised when we see the chief

priests and the elders and the scribes coming together (Mark 14:53) for one common purpose: to seek “testimony against Jesus to put him to death” (14:55). The problem was they couldn’t find any. He was the spotless Lamb of God. Free of sin. The only one who didn’t deserve condemnation or death. But that didn’t stop them from walking in their fathers’ footsteps, and putting to death not only another prophet, but *the* Prophet, the Christ sent from heaven, the Son of God himself.

Now, you may be wondering, how does all this pertain to me? Doesn’t the condemnation only apply to murderers like Cain or the religious leaders of Jesus’ day? Surely, this doesn’t apply to Christians like us? Well, on one hand, it’s true. We weren’t there. But the scribes and Pharisees weren’t present at the murder of all the Old Testament prophets, either, and Jesus doesn’t let them off the hook. And here’s why: it’s because the same sin that has been in human hearts since the Fall was also in their hearts, and it’s within our hearts, as well.

Listen to what God’s Word says. The Apostle John writes, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15). And later in the epistle, John writes, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (4:20).

Follow the logic. If I claim to love God while hating my brother, I am both a murderer and a liar, and cannot actually claim to love God. And if I don’t love God, then I too stand condemned. What’s more, in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, the explanation to the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not murder,” is this: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.” Have you taken every opportunity to help your neighbor, whether it’s your spouse, your family, your friends, those you meet on the street, *even your enemies*, and help them with every one of their physical needs?

We can make all sorts of excuses about not helping someone in this body and life. We can even assume there are good reasons for not liking someone else. We can harbor anger or resentment against our neighbor and withhold forgiveness. We can justify why the person we despise deserves it. But all we end up doing is making ourselves guilty of murder in God’s sight, and placing ourselves under his condemnation for our sin. You see, as much as we’d like to say, “Well, if I had lived in the days of Jesus, I wouldn’t have taken part in his murder,” or as much as we might like to reason away and distance ourselves from the sin of murder, assuming it to be only one kind of thing, the guiltier we become.

The religious leaders ended up filling the measure of their fathers in today’s Passion Reading, and if we allow the Word of God to honestly speak to us, then we must see ourselves right along with them. And while we may not have been physically present at Jesus’ trial to condemn him, God’s Word clearly states that Jesus “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). In other words, our sins, including our breaking of the Fifth Commandment, contributed towards putting Jesus on the cross.

Isn’t it interesting that what ended up condemning Jesus, after all the attempts of false testimony on behalf of the religious council, were the only words of truth spoken that night? Caiaphas the high priest asked Jesus, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus finally spoke, and said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). And that sealed Jesus’ fate.

But you see, even despite the outpouring of anger, wrath, and murderous intent, Jesus was there because he intended to be there. He intended to be the recipient of this guilty verdict, because his Father had willed it, and the Son was willing. He was willing to be crucified and killed at the hands of sinful human beings *in order to save those same human beings*. Romans says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (5:8–9).

The wrath of God is not a murderous glance from the Father, but a look of righteous

judgment upon the guilt of our sin. And we all deserve God's wrath for our sin. But instead of giving us what we deserve, God chose to pour out that punishment on his Son. And Jesus willingly took all our sin and its condemnation to the cross, in order to justify us by his holy and precious blood.

From the cross, Jesus looked out not only upon the people who were gathered there, but also upon all of humanity, and he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And in doing so, Jesus demonstrated to us the perfect way in which he fulfills all the commandments, including loving and caring for us in both body and soul as our perfect neighbor. When we see the consequence of our sin in Christ's death, and when we are convicted that we also are guilty, *then* we are finally prepared to hear the Good News, and to see that by his loving sacrifice, the wrath of God that we deserved was extinguished.

Romans goes on to say, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (5:10). We *are* reconciled to God, because Jesus turned our murderous eyes away from sin, guilt, and despair, and instead he lifts our eyes to see Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Our Savior and Lord who has conquered both sin and death, so that he now gives us eternal life. And knowing we have this life, we now live in the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation we have with God, and we can now show genuine love and concern for our neighbors, as well. We are able to care for them in this body and life the way a Christian should.

It may be a surprising thing to talk about, in this era of "social distancing," when people feel so disconnected, isolated, or apart from one another. We may forget about our obligation to care for each other in a time like this. But perhaps what this time shows us is how to better care for our neighbor's well-being in ways we haven't thought about before. Probably the biggest thing we can do is just to make a phone call, to say hello, to let them know we care. We can also pray with and for each other. We can go to the grocery store for those who can't get out. We can help someone get to the doctor when there's an emergency. We even sacrifice the things we normally would want to do, so that we put others' needs before our own, and we help keep them safe.

This is a time when, as Christians, because we know our security rests not in this body and life, but in the resurrected body and life to come, we don't have to worry about protecting and preserving our well-being as our first priority. Using reason and making wise choices, yes, but first and foremost, making choices for the well-being of those around us. That's our challenge in a time like this. And because of all that Jesus has done for our as our perfect neighbor, as our gracious Savior, we then, by the power of the Holy Spirit can live as loving neighbors to those around us. We can serve and love them. All because God has transformed our once sinful and murderous eyes to be more like his, fixed on Jesus, and fixed on reflecting his love to those in this world. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

(Sermon adapted from the series, *Eyes on Jesus*, copyrighted by Concordia Publishing House [St. Louis], 2019.)