

Midweek 4

The Semblance of Legality

Sermon Text: Luke 22:66

^{ESV}(Luke 22:66) *When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council.*

The chronology or timeline of exactly what happened on Thursday night and Friday morning of Holy Week can be a bit confusing. Jesus actually had multiple trials – five of them in fact. The mob sent from the Jewish leaders arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, bound him and led his first to the house of Annas, where they had their first trial. Annas had been the High Priest, and he was the father-in-law of the current High Priest, Caiaphas. Annas then sent him to Caiaphas where they had a second trial. They then sent him to the Roman Governor Pilate where they had another trial. Pilate then sent Jesus to a different Roman Governor, Herod, where they held a fourth trial. Finally Herod returned Jesus to Pilate, where they had their fifth and final trial. Why so many?

The Jews would undoubtedly have answered that they wanted to do everything properly – by the book. They had made problems for themselves that had to be overcome. First, they wanted to arrest Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness. They feared the people, the mob, so they decided to arrest Jesus at night. This created their first problem: *We've got him, now what do we do with him?* Legally, what they were supposed to do was to hold their prisoner until sunrise. Jewish law prohibited nighttime trials. So what did they do? They conducted Jesus' first trial at night. But wasn't that prohibited? Evidently not when you are trying to convict an innocent man. The Jews realized they had no evidence to convict Jesus, so they were looking at the prospect of having to rely on paid false witnesses. They were more than willing to do that, but what if they could get Jesus to confess? What if they could get him to make blasphemous statements in their presence? Then they could dispense with the paid false witnesses because they themselves could serve as the witnesses. They were undoubtedly very pleased with themselves when Jesus gave them exactly what they wanted. You recall their "Ah ha!" moment when Jesus told them, without equivocation, that he was, in fact, the Promised Messiah: ***And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."*** ⁶⁴ ***Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."*** ⁶⁵ ***Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy."*** ^{ESV}(Matthew 26:63-65) "Ha! We've got him now, boys!"

I once heard a story of a man who shot a cooler-full of pheasants in the springtime, well outside of the legal hunting season. When he showed them to a friend, that friend noticed that he had shot both roosters and hens and objected that you are not supposed to shoot hens. The man's response was, "You're not supposed to shoot any pheasants in April, so what does it matter?" At least he was an honest poacher who made no pretense about his lawlessness.

Not so with the Jews. They wanted to maintain the semblance of legality. Again, sort of. If *they* had shot pheasants out of season, *they* would have shot only roosters. They wanted to be able to pick and choose. On the one hand, they were trying to put an innocent man to death, so they may as well hold an illegal nighttime trial. Yet in doing wrong, they still wanted their actions to *appear* to be right, just, above-board. So they held a second trial after sunrise. Unlike the first trial, they would do this one right. Sort of. This trial would be held during the day and they would

gather the entire Sanhedrin, like they were supposed to, so that they could properly convict this innocent man. Oh, and they would beat this innocent man barbarically, but at a properly convened trial.

This preoccupation with the appearance of legality also explains what comes next. The Jews haul Jesus off to the Roman Governor for his third trial. Why would they do that? The Jews hated and resented their Roman overlords. Why take Jesus to a Roman court when they had already found him guilty? Pilate, you will recall, had the same question: ***So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"*** ³⁰ ***They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."*** ³¹ ***Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law."*** ***The Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."***^{ESV}(John 18:29-31) Again, the semblance of legality, and now the Jews were quoting *Roman* law. According to the Law of Moses they *did* have that right, but not according to Roman law.

There was something else at work here. The Jewish leaders were not only maintaining the semblance of legality, they were covering themselves. By bringing Jesus to Pilate, later they could claim that they hadn't put him to death, the Romans did it. They are still making that same claim to this day – which is handy in that there aren't any Romans running around today from which we could demand reparations.

Pilate quickly figures out that the Jews had brought him an innocent man and wants nothing to do with him. To his relief he believes he has found a way out. He learns that the accused man is a Galilean, and as such he falls under Governor Herod's jurisdiction. So he sends Jesus to Herod for his fourth trial. All perfectly legal – except maybe for the fact that when Herod finds no fault in Jesus, he and his soldiers nonetheless beat him mercilessly and publicly humiliate him. He then sends Jesus back to Pilate for his fifth and final trial.

Pilate, under the semblance of legality, not only sentences a man to death that he knows to be innocent, he orders that he be executed in the most excruciatingly painful way – a form of execution normally reserved for only the worst offenders. But it's all okay. It's all legal, and Pilate takes the added precaution of literally and symbolically washing his hands of the whole affair. He knows that what he is doing is wrong, but he does it anyway – even as he makes a futile attempt at distancing himself *from his own actions*.

The entire shameful day is filled with the semblance of legality and the veneer of righteousness. You will recall how the Jews made Pilate come out to them, rather than they enter his courtroom – which would have rendered the Jews ceremonially unclean and thus unable to celebrate the Passover. What bitter irony in that while they were preparing to celebrate their own family Passover, which included the sacrifice of their own Passover lamb, they were also intent on killing the very Passover Lamb of God. Later, they demanded that those who were being crucified be killed more quickly so that their bodies would not be on the cross on the sabbath day. The semblance of legality, the façade of propriety.

That was what the Jews and the Romans did on Thursday and Friday of Holy Week. Is that why we are here? Is that what Lent is all about – a special time to expose the sins of others and to shake our heads in righteous condemnation? If that's what we allow it to be, we would be every bit as pathetic as the Pharisee in the temple, thanking God that *"we are not like other men."* True Christianity is not about condemning the sins of others, it's about the dispensation of our own sins. The season of Lent, in particular, is about using the bad conduct of others to learn something about ourselves. It is about examining the sinful conduct of others to identify and root out sin in our own lives. So now we ask the key question: *What about me? What about us? Am I*

guilty - are we guilty - of that same semblance of legality? The honest answer is that of course we are.

The semblance of legality (the outward *appearance* of propriety) is so much easier than actual propriety, isn't it. Covering ourselves in a thin veneer of righteousness is infinitely easier than fulltime obedience. The semblance of morality is a parttime job. True morality is fulltime. What's more, we can do the semblance thing in one area and imagine that it covers all. We're actually very good at that sort of thing. We use the sins that *aren't* particularly appealing to us to cover the sins that *are*. We mask our impure sexual thoughts and actions by boldly declaring our condemnation of abortion, adultery, and homosexuality. We mask any abuse of drugs or alcohol or speeding or cheating on our taxes by opposing that shameful "defund the police" and championing "law and order." We mask our poverty of faithful witnessing with bold confessions made to fellow Christians, and cover all the times we served as extremely poor examples by making sure everyone knows when we actually did the right thing.

It's easy to fool others; not so much with God. Do a few things that you are proud of, post them to Facebook, and viola – the successful creation of the semblance of legality, righteousness, propriety, and morality.

Obviously there is nothing wrong with doing things "by the book." That's not the negative lesson we are supposed to learn from the Jews that condemned Jesus. Jesus himself did everything "by the book" – or, more accurately, "by the Book." What we are to learn from the example of those who condemned Jesus to death was that doing the right thing in one area does not excuse all those areas where we fail. Nor is it beneficial to imagine or pretend that it does. Doing some things well never justifies other sins, other failures. We should never imagine that the outward appearance that we project to the world has any bearing on how God sees us. God sees us as we truly are – which is why he sent his Son. He wasn't fooled. God never plays the fool.

While you and I foolishly try to mask the cancer of our own sin, Jesus came to earth to break our slavery to it. He came to pay for what you and I owed. His righteousness wasn't a veneer or façade. He didn't project a semblance of righteousness; he was absolutely and thoroughly righteous in every way. He hid nothing, pretended nothing, failed in nothing. He then took that perfection to the cross and offered it there as payment for the imperfect – for you and me. God the Father accepted his Son's perfect life and innocent death as payment in full for the debt of our sins. He didn't declare our sin-debt forgiven because he was fooled by our semblance of righteousness; he declared us righteousness because of the actual, true righteousness of his Son.

The end result is that we have no need of pretense, no need to put on airs or to project ourselves to the world as better than we actually are. Christ is not magnified when we do that. He is diminished and disrespected. Instead of the semblance of righteousness, bring all of your sins, honestly and openly, to Jesus. Lay them at the foot of the cross. Confess your utter failure and complete unworthiness. And then thrill to his declaration that all of your sins are forgiven. Jesus did that. Jesus alone. Amen.