

March 25, 2016 - Good Friday

The Passion of Christ – Guilty as Charged!

Luke 22:47–23:25



As a society, we take great pride in the fact that we're not judgmental. Live and let live. But there's a reason why people watch Judge Judy and Divorce Court. A reason why shows like L.A. Law, C.S.I., and Law and Order were part of the prime-time lineup for a long time. A reason why we've been consumed by the cases of O. J. Simpson, Casey Anthony, and the whole business with Trayvon Martin. Fact is, we're lawyers and judges, every one of us. When the guilty walk free, our blood boils; we're frosted

when the innocent are condemned; and we feel no little satisfaction when others get what's coming to them.

But we're more than lawyers and judges. Secretly, we wonder how we would hold up under the spotlight of justice. If put on trial for a misdemeanor, is it just possible we'd end up being convicted of felony?

On an occasion a crime investigator was interviewed for his success. When asked how he got so many criminals to confess, he revealed a method surprisingly simple. He'd knock on the door of an unsuspecting soul, and, having flashed a badge, he'd say, "We know what you did, and you won't get away with it much longer." Now, what's funny is that the investigator often walked in with only a hunch, and sometimes not even that. But time and again, folks broke down, confessing crimes, many of which the investigator had no clue about. Ah, the betraying heart!

But as soon as we feel guilty or reveal our guilty heart, we do begin to justify ourselves.

Someone eats an ice-cream cone, but feels strangely compelled to tell you he's going to exercise later or that he ate a salad for lunch. A young girl shows up in a beautiful new dress but adds that she got it off the bargain rack or that it was a one-time splurge. And, of course, we lie. We lie to our doctors, our bosses, and our friends. To make ourselves look better, to win their approval, their favorable verdicts.

We want to look good in the eyes of others, but even more, we want to think well of ourselves. So, we lie to ourselves. We explain away bad behavior with mitigating circumstances; we blame others; we pretend or simply ignore the charges. We pile up a heap of good works that will somehow balance the scales, taking pride in charity, going to church, reading the Bible. And when we we've done good, we say, "To God be the glory," all the while patting ourselves on the back.

But you don't have to be a Christian to think this way. Throw away the Ten Commandments, and you'll produce 613 more. So, you don't go to church, and anything could have happened. There are people who have paid for a couple of abortions, slept around; there are those who have skimmed a little off the top, dumped their wife. What of it? Many of us recycle, and we don't smoke. There are those who

support gay rights and women in the priesthood. There are those who are concerned with global warming and the environment, industrial farming and Chinese factories. There are those who posted against Kony, marched against illiteracy, hunger, and the all right types of cancer, so on, which proves definitively that they are not judgmental, unlike some people you know. Yes, we're all well practiced in the art of self-justification.

But now we're in the familiar Lutheran territory. Lutherans are, ironically enough, often accused of overemphasizing forensic justification. Forensic justification is a term that describes God's act of removing the guilt and penalty of sin while at the same time declaring a sinner righteous through Christ's atoning sacrifice, and given to us by faith alone.

Now, rather than offer up a defense, perhaps we should just admit it and say, "Guilty as charged." And then, we do well to remember that justice isn't just a New Testament Biblical concept, and you don't need to go to the epistle of Romans to find a courtroom. What are the Gospels but a drama that ends in a trial? And what do we see in that courtroom but the only man in all of human history who could have truly justified himself but chose not to? Well, here is a passionate man who was willing to say "guilty as charge" on your behalf in that court room.

And it is that courtroom drama we witness today. The legal team for the prosecution includes an assembly of elders, chief priests, and scribes. Pontius Pilate plays the judge. And Jesus, acting as his own counsel, stands accused.

As the trial proceeds, the accusers throw all kinds of accusations. But to their frustration, they just don't work. Jesus was no revolutionary, no enemy of the empire. He told his followers to pay taxes to Caesar. He told Peter to put away his sword.

Of what could they really accuse him? Of making the blind to see and the deaf to hear? Of cleansing lepers, healing paralytics, and bringing the dead back to life? The whole trial was absurd; a circus no less.

Pilate may not have had the wisdom of Solomon, but even a fool could see that Jesus was innocent. Even one as feckless as Herod had to concur in the judgment. Jesus had done nothing worthy of death.

A decent enough politician, Pilate offered up a deal. "We'll give him another beating, and then let him go." But the high-society accusers incited the crowd into a mob, shouting, "Crucify him, crucify him." Pilate tried again, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found no guilt deserving death." But the mob grew restless and shouted out all the louder, until Pilate give in and handed over for crucifixion an innocent man. An unjust trial really, a trail that makes you sick to your stomach.

Yet beneath the surface, another trial is taking place. In this trial, every accusation is true, every charge verified, and every allegation corroborated by rock-solid evidence.

Yes, a crime had been committed. Many crimes. Crimes against humanity, crimes against God. And Jesus was getting what was coming to him. Or should we say, he allowed himself to get what was coming to us, he is passionate about us to the point of taking the blame for us. He's accused of our crimes, and he's denying nothing. Our own hands bloody, we watch as Jesus takes the rap. Instead of standing up for himself, or justifying himself, he says nothing in his own defense.

Guilty Barabbas, a murderer and a rebel, is set free. And the innocent Jesus offers no word of protest.

And now we, too, are left speechless. No more excuses. No more balancing the scales. Our days of self-justification are over. Anything we say on our own behalf would only tarnish the moment; anything we'd do to make ourselves look or feel better would tarnish the gift, anything we say to justify ourselves will only prove us to be liars. Therefore it will do us good to trust the verdict and him say "charged as guilty". And, in a strange way, we can only think, better him than me.

Yet, today dear friends, once again we see his passion for each one of us. His passion to save the sinner took him to be declared guilty when he was not. He is passionate about each one us! But, again the questions is, are we, are we passionate about Him and his saving grace? Are we passionate about his gifts of grace?

And as we ponder on our passion for him, may we bow our heads in thanksgiving and praise. In His name, amen.