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Psalm 111

Matthew 26:57-68

GRACE AT THE CRUX: INJUSTICE

The evening had begun with the observance of the Passover meal. Jesus and his disciples gathered together for the celebration of the anniversary of the end of a great injustice back when the Hebrew people were liberated from slavery in Egypt over a thousand years before. A different kind of costly liberation was in the works this night. After the meal, Jesus led his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he would pray for God's guidance and strength for what laid ahead of him. Instead of being a supportive presence to Jesus in his time of searching for God's will, the disciples sleep through it all. Temple guards arrive, guided by Judas, one of Jesus' closest followers, who betrayed him, with a kiss, no less. As the guards begin to arrest Jesus, there is a disciple who uses a sword to strike a servant of the high priest, injuring him. Jesus stops the outbreak of violence. Then he is taken to the house of the high priest to be interrogated. It is the middle of the night by now; Peter is hanging around outdoors and would deny his Lord three times.

That is where we are in the story of Jesus' journey to the cross as we have had this part of the gospel narrative as our focus during these Lenten weeks. Now we take a look at what is somewhere between a religious hearing and a trial before religious leaders. The high priest has called in the Sanhedrin, which was an important council of priests and other leaders charged with handling internal affairs among the Jews. They had an interest in maintaining the status quo which provided them with power and privilege. Jesus had challenged the authority of these religious leaders, criticizing their lack of consistency because they talked the talk about commitment to God's ways, but they did not always walk the walk that lived out that commitment. Those with power and privilege were not seemingly interested in what was just, right, and true, especially if it would challenge their authority. To hold a legal hearing in the middle of the night, particularly during the midst of the Passover festival, would have been quite irregular, but it shows the level of desperation these leaders felt about Jesus, primarily because of his critiques of how

they had used their power and influence. What is even more irregular is their active search for false testimony against Jesus so they could quiet his witness against them permanently. They did not want to get justice; they wanted to get Jesus. The problem with false witnesses is that they get tangled in their own lies, and the parade of willing frauds who took the stand produced no usable evidence. Finally, however, two witnesses, which is the minimum number under Jewish law, were found who proclaimed, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'" In actuality, Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple, and it would happen a number of years later. However, he also was proclaiming that he was an entity, a temple if you will, where people could meet God, and he would be destroyed, but then would rise from the dead in three days. The council was not interested in understanding Jesus accurately - the thought that he was a terrorist ready to destroy the temple would be something they could use against him.

The high priest then presses on whether Jesus believes himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God. It would not do for Jesus to respond with a simple 'yes,' because the high priest is defining the term with his own pinched meaning about the title, 'Messiah.' If Jesus were to respond affirmatively, he would be submitting to the defining terms of the questioner. Instead, Jesus replies, "You have said so," which in effect means, "Yes, but not on your terms." Then Jesus quotes scripture about himself that dramatically reverses the power dynamic in the room. The high priest might think he is in charge, putting this renegade rabbi on trial for his life, but Jesus is actually positioned on the judgement seat. It is more like that the high priest is really the defendant, and the one standing before him will be seated at the right hand of divine power at the end. In a rage, the high priest tears his garments and proclaims Jesus has uttered blasphemy. A swift death verdict is rendered by the council and then the group vents the ugliness of its continuing hunger for power as it physically abuses him even as it had previously abused the truth.

We must first be very clear that these temple authorities that arrested and charged Jesus, did not represent the Jewish people as a whole. This small group of religious leaders was willing to collude with oppressive political forces in ways that did not serve the vast majority of the Jewish people. A small group of people have misused

this part of the Jesus story to charge that the Jews as a whole were Christ-killers, an idea that fomented the hatred that led to the holocaust. Nothing could be more disrespectful of God than that. And yet, many Christians have recoiled from this part of the story to avoid the taint of anti-Semitism. Sadly, these particular religious leaders were not interested in truth or love or justice, and we see the contrast with the one who stood quietly before them on trial. They wanted the peace and quiet of the way things were instead of peace and justice. It was a dangerous priority to hold onto. This man named Jesus was viewed as an intruder on the temple authorities' turf. He had not shown them the due deference they felt they deserved. Their actions were consistent with what they thought would serve their own positions of power. If a crucifixion was what was needed for their own self-interest, then unjust reasons for a crucifixion would be manufactured.

However, we see from the gospel account that Jesus does not exercise an authority imposed upon others, but one that flows out of his ultimate grounding in the will of God. He is a good man, but he is more than that. His story goes beyond simply being a noble example. He is an innocent sufferer, but he is more than that too. We see in him the expressed desire of God to stand with all who are treated unjustly - the lowly, the ridiculed, the bullied, the tortured, and the abused. Jesus stands before his interrogators not as an insurrectionist, nor as one who uses deadly force, but as one whose quiet, truthful, power is transformative, is life-giving to all who will receive it.

Jesus faced their questions in the middle of the night and we face a few ourselves this Sunday morning. Will we be devoted to religious or political leaders who neglect what is just, right, and true in order to enhance their own standing and power, or will we as people of faith explore the holy ground of standing for what is just for all who get ignored or abused by the power brokers? Will we side with the establishment powers of the status quo or will we partner with the higher power who quietly lifts up the lowly? Will we recognize and follow the One who has real authority in our lives, who is grounded in God's good intent for all? There is still much that is unjust in our world today. It is our turn to judge and respond to the quiet one named Jesus, who stands before you and me.

