

A Place for an Enemy

John 11:45-54

West Valley Presbyterian Church, March 17, 2024

Last week Rev. Misfeldt talked about the faith of Jesus' friends Martha and Mary, and how Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. If you've ever seen a dead person, you know that they don't look like they are asleep, or unconscious. They look gone. They're not there any more. And Lazarus had been dead and gone for 4 days. Jesus' raising him from the dead was an extraordinary act of power. And as you might imagine, that extraordinary act of power had repercussions, which we will hear about today.

Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from the gospel of John, chapter 11, vv 45-54.

SLIDES 2- 7

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

⁴⁹ Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

⁵⁴ Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

Though Jesus opposed a lot of what the religious leaders said and did, he was not their enemy. He had at least a couple of friends on the Sanhedrin – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. They loved Jesus enough to claim his body and bury it, in a new tomb, with an extraordinary quantity of myrrh and aloes.

But though Jesus did not regard the Sanhedrin as his enemy, most of them regarded him as their enemy. Enough of an enemy that they preferred to turn him over to the Romans rather than deal with him themselves.

Why was that? Because, they said, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." They did have good reason to be concerned. Though there was no full-scale war in Judea or Galilee in 30 AD, there was widespread discontent. The pot wasn't yet boiling over; but it was getting there! A Jewish historian of the period, Josephus, wrote that there had been various local riots and uprisings throughout Galilee and Judea from about 37 AD (seven years after Jesus' death) all the way through to 66 AD, when there was full-fledged rebellion against Rome. Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD; Masada was destroyed in 73 AD; and Wikipedia's estimates are that about one third of the Jewish population in Galilee and Judea was wiped out as a result of the 66-73 war.

The relative local autonomy that there was in Judea in 30 AD depended on the local government being able to maintain internal peace and order. Which the Sanhedrin did in the year that they arrested Jesus and turned him over to the Romans. But within 7 more years, they had lost control of the populace. War leaders with Messianic pretensions did start rising up. Caiaphas wasn't wrong to worry about local riots erupting into uprisings that would be brutally put down by the Romans.

So, yes, Caiaphas regarded Jesus as an enemy. He was a logical man. When he says to his colleagues, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people, than that the whole nation perish," that's a logical statement. But it's also true that Caiaphas just plain doesn't like Jesus. He shows no regret, does he? He does NOT say, "Well, I really don't want to turn over a fellow Jew to the Romans, who are probably going to crucify him. I'd hate to do that. But it's better than a rebellion, with the Romans coming in and crucifying thousands of us, instead of one. So, regretfully, I think we'll have to arrest Jesus and turn him over." He does not say that! He has no regret! He says, essentially, "It's better for all of us if this guy dies."

Ironically, Caiaphas is right – though I don't think he knew it. It is better for all of us that Jesus died. Caiaphas made a prophetic statement there, even though it was unintentional. John 11:51-52 tells us, "He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation, but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one."

When Jesus was physically alive on this earth, he showed us God's power and God's love. And he taught us what God wants from us. He made all this very clear. The problem is, we are not capable of doing things like forgiving our adversaries, or loving our enemies, or giving to anyone who asks for something from us, by our own efforts. We are not able to live as God calls us to live, by our own efforts. Our sin separates us from God, and we can't fix it. God knows that, far better than we do. And because God loves us so much, he wants us to be close to him. He wants us to be transformed into the people he created us to be. He wants to forgive us. But we have to be able to receive God's forgiveness, for that to happen.

That was the point of sacrificing something of great value, like an ox or a lamb, back in the day. A sacrifice to God of something very valuable makes the seriousness of our sin real, and it makes our desire to be forgiven real. Then we are in a frame of mind to accept God's forgiveness. But what if our collective sin, as human beings, is more than can be atoned for with anything we have? Then God provides the sacrifice. God came in the person of Jesus to be the sacrifice. So that we can see the seriousness of our sin, and repent, and accept God's forgiveness – and belong to him forever. I belong to God. You do too.

I'm sure that Caiaphas didn't know that Jesus was, and is, and will always be, the Son of God. I'm sure Caiaphas didn't know that turning Jesus over to the Romans would result in bringing together all the scattered children of God and making them one, as John puts it. I'm sure Caiaphas didn't know that Jesus' death would result in forgiveness for everyone who wants it, no matter what their sins might have been! No matter where or when they lived! I'm sure he didn't know that he, as Jesus' enemy, was part of God's plan to redeem all of creation through Jesus.

God can, and God does, work through our enemies as well as through our friends, to bring about his kingdom. That can happen even if the enemies in question know nothing about it. For example: do you remember when we studied the stoning of Stephen by the Sanhedrin? What was the consequence of that? Stephen died, and the church was scattered. And new churches got started throughout the Mediterranean world and down into Africa as far as Ethiopia. Paul was the most well known of the missionaries; but he was not the only one. When he wrote his letter to the Roman church in 57 AD, he was addressing a strong congregation that was able to send and support missionaries themselves.

Or as another example: the emperor Diocletian was responsible for a thoroughgoing persecution of Christians in 303 AD. He felt that the existence of Christians was breaking up the covenant between Rome and the ancient Roman gods, and that the city of Rome was suffering as a result. So throughout the empire, he ordered churches to be destroyed; Scriptures to be burned; and all Christians to be forced to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods. And the result of his effort to destroy Christianity? A new emperor took over – Constantine – who defeated his opponents in the name of Christ, and encouraged Christianity to grow. Which it did. The Nicene Creed, which we still say today, was established during his reign in 325 AD.

Or as a more current example: Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Maybe you remember her? She was a very troubled individual, who was nevertheless also responsible for the Supreme Court ruling that mandatory Bible reading in public schools was unconstitutional, back in 1963. She definitely saw herself as an enemy of the Christian faith. But the result of all her work would not have pleased her. There may not be as many cultural Christians now as there were in 1963 – that is to say, folks who just went along with everyone else. But there are more devoted Christians now who take their faith seriously. God worked through O'Hair's enmity towards Christians, to make clear what it means to be a Christian. It means to follow Jesus, wherever he might lead, knowing that it's not going to be easy. But then, Jesus never says that it's going to be easy. He says we should follow him. God worked through O'Hair to help make that distinction clear, between going along with everyone else, and, following Jesus.

So if God can, and does, work through enemies of the Christian faith, what do you think he might do with any personal enemies you might have? Is there someone in your life whom you regard as an enemy? It could be that your enemy is part of God's plan for your life. Close your eyes and think for a minute. Is there anyone whom you really don't like, and who really doesn't like you? Can you think of anyone who has harmed you? There probably is, given that none of us are perfect. Or maybe there is someone who opposes you at every turn? Again, there probably is, given that none of us are perfect. /// In Matthew 5:44, Jesus says, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." After all, God worked through Caiaphas. God worked through the Sanhedrin. God has worked through many people who considered themselves to be his enemies. Who knows, perhaps there is a place for an enemy in God's plan for your life? Let's see if we can pray a version of the Lord's Prayer for our enemies. We pray this for ourselves; can we pray it for our enemies?

Our Father in heaven, may our enemies come to know you and hallow your name. May our enemies enter into your kingdom and be loyal to you. May our enemies discern your will for their lives, and delight in obeying your will, while they live on this earth. Grant that our enemies' needs be met. Forgive our enemies, and help them in turn to forgive any who have harmed them. Protect them from temptation, and keep them safe from the power of evil. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.