

Maundy Thursday
"A Murder Mystery: Who Killed Jesus?"
Mark 14:1-31
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It was five o'clock on a winter's morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining-car, a sleeping-car and two local coaches.

By the step leading into the sleeping-car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, conversing with a small man muffled up to the ears of whom nothing was visible but a pink-tipped nose and two points of an upward curled moustache.

These are the opening lines to Agatha Christie's great mystery novel, *Murder On the Orient Express*. Not long out of the station, a mysterious stranger is murdered; multiple stab wounds are found in his body. Hercule Poirot, Christie's famous detective, has been called in to solve the murder before the legendary train arrives at its destination in Istanbul. Is it Colonel Arbuthnot returning from the Punjab in India? Is it the Hungarian nobleman, Count Andrenyi or his countess wife? Could it be the German maid, Hildegard Schmidt, or the Swede, Greta Ohlsson? There are twelve suspects for Poirot to sift through- which one committed the murder on the Orient Express?

Well this evening, we have a SIMILAR mystery to sift through. Two thousand years ago, an innocent man was murdered on a cross overlooking a hill called Golgotha, and like Poirot, we have been summoned to determine WHO DID IT and WHY. Like any murder, his death was no accident but the willful and deliberate act of persons every bit as sinister as the characters in an Agatha Christie novel. For the past two months, we've taken out our magnifying glass and held it up to a whole cast of biblical characters in what was the final 24-hours of our Lord's earthly life. We were introduced to PERSONS OF GREAT POWER AND INFLUENCE such as King Herod who saw Jesus as nothing more than cheap entertainment, and Pontius Pilate--the governor over the region--who though sympathetic to Jesus' plight, ALONE had the power to put him to death. There were IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS FIGURES such as the high priests Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, and the members of the Sanhedrin--the Jewish High Court—who in concert with the Pharisees and Sadducees had grown jealous over his growing popularity and saw him as a threat for disrupting their authority and vested interests. More concerned with retribution than meting out justice, they had ALREADY decided upon his guilt and determined his sentence before any evidence had EVEN BEEN PRESENTED. We heard THE HYSTERICAL MOBS who were incited to call out for our Lord's death and who ultimately chose to free a murderer and a thief named Barabbas over one who preached and practiced nothing but love. There were ROMAN FUNCTIONARIES such as the guards who stripped and beat Jesus and then ordered a black Jew from Cyrene named Simon to help carry his cross when he no longer had the strength to do so himself. Then when they arrived at Golgotha--the place of his execution--they nailed him to a cross and with one FINAL indignity, divided

amongst themselves the very last thing Jesus possessed on this earth- the cloak off his back. And, of course, if we're looking at suspects, we have to ALSO include one who was NOT a part of our series and yet had his hands stained with Christ's own blood all the same- A JUDEAN LIKE JESUS HIMSELF NAMED JUDAS who treacherously betrayed him with a kiss and then sold him out for thirty pieces of silver. So WHO deserves to be named "guilty" for history's most infamous murder? Like a game of *Clue*, this is our task to determine this night.

Being there are SO MANY suspects, I've limited our investigation to only a handful of defendants- the MAIN ones. The first in the witness box is the Roman governor who ordered Jesus' execution, Pontius Pilate. Although Pilate was a capable administrator, his primary function was to preserve peace throughout the region at all costs. The first time Jesus meets Pilate, the governor appeared impressed with his noble demeanor and self-control. It was hard for him to believe that such a simple and gentle man was capable of all the violent revolutionary activity the Jews had accused him of. However, not wanting to get in the middle of what he considered a "local" problem, he attempted to shift responsibility by transferring Jesus to Herod's jurisdiction in the hope that the matter would quietly die there. However, when Herod showed no interest in getting involved either, he had him returned to Pilate to deal with the matter.

After their second encounter, Pilate told the crowds that he was convinced that Jesus was no more than a harmless rabbi, that he could find no grounds on which to execute him. He thought that if he had him beaten and whipped and then released, that would satisfy the mob. But when that didn't work, he tried a third maneuver. He resorted to the Jewish custom of granting amnesty to a prisoner during Passover. But his plan was AGAIN thwarted when the crowds clamored for the thief and murderer Barabbas instead. With every avenue of freeing Jesus now exhausted, he tries to wash his hands of the matter and declare himself innocent of his blood. Still not satisfied, the crowds insist, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar!" Boxed into a corner, Pilate feels he has no other choice but to condemn Jesus to death. Fearing a riot, he is forced to publicly declare to whom his loyalty ultimately lay- whether to the Emperor Caesar to whom he owed his entire career, or to Jesus, this alleged King of the Jews whom the Jews THEMSELVES did not even want. To satisfy the crowd and save his job, he gives in to their demands and orders the execution of Jesus to take place.

Thus, with Pontius Pilate, we find a man in the position of having to choose between honor, on the one hand, and ambition on the other; between principle and that of political survival- and he chose the latter. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is found innocent in the heart and mind of Pilate, declared innocent in the eyes of Roman law, but is nevertheless sent to his death because Pilate is afraid- afraid for his job, afraid for his relationship to Caesar, afraid for his future in the empire. Pontius Pilate had Jesus murdered because he was a moral coward and all the water in all the world could not wash that stain from his hands.

But now let's take a look at those Jewish leaders who were so insistent that Jesus had to die. This influential and highly educated group of men were trained from their earliest years in the Torah and the Law of God. It was their job to look for and prepare the people for the advent of "the Promised One," the "Son of God." But when he finally DID arrive, instead of celebration

and great joy, he was ridiculed, conspired against, and arrested on false charges. Thus, they TOO were complicit in his murder. But WHY?

Jesus, was a radical figure, one who lived and spoke the truth, and to persons who take comfort and refuge in lies and deceit, he will ALWAYS represent a threat. From the beginning, he was anti-establishment. He grew up the son of a poor carpenter. He had no college education or seminary training and certainly never pastored a church. Lacking all Presbyterian credentials, he became a self-ordained rabbi whose teachings were often deemed blasphemous and heretical. Some of his claims were SO outrageous that there were times that his own DISCIPLES wondered whether they had made a great mistake in leaving everything and following him in the first place. He said things like that if they would be his disciples, they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood; he warned that this would also require that they take up their OWN cross and follow him. He drew strange looks with his claims that he could forgive sins and at times, even suggested that he WAS God, saying: "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" and "I and the Father are one."

And yet, despite his lack of credentials and professional training, people were reached and lives changed in a way that the spokespersons of mainstream religion NEVER could. He spoke directly to the needs and concerns of the poor, the sick, the tired, and the outcast who discovered in him a love and a hope which they couldn't find elsewhere. He proved himself fearless in denouncing the Pharisees and Sadducees as "hypocrites" and "whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but inside, full of dead men's bones." They knew that if Jesus' ministry was allowed to continue, not only would their CREDIBILITY suffer but their AUTHORITY would be undermined. In order to retain their power and their privilege, there was only one course of action left for them- to rid themselves once and for all of Jesus by having this trouble-maker, this disturber of their highly profitable, very comfortable system, put to death.

So why did the Jews murder Jesus? Because they were jealous of him and his message. They marveled at the power of his preaching saying, "No man ever spoke like this one." They knew in their hearts that Jesus had an anointing and a wisdom that could only have come from God. He did indeed speak the truth, but their system was so corrupt and their own position and power was so tied to that system, that it was far preferable to rid themselves of Jesus than bow before his truth. They therefore had him killed in the cruelest way imaginable.

But then we come to the one person who more than any other was MOST responsible for Jesus' death. I'm talking about Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver. We are told that Judas had an obsession with money. He complained when the sinful women anointed our Lord's head and feet with expensive perfume, asking why such an expensive gift could not have been sold and the money given to the poor. But this was not because he had any particular sympathy for the poor, but because he was a thief who was also in charge of the group's finances. Thus we begin to develop a picture of Judas as a thief, a hypocrite, a greedy and avaricious man whose evil reaches full development in his betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver- the equivalent of about fourteen dollars, the normal value of a slave.

And so WHY did Judas assist in the murder of Jesus? Because of GREED. He loved material possessions more than SPIRITUAL treasure. His god was the golden calf the Israelites danced before in the wilderness, not the God that sided with the poor and dispossessed, the God of love and mercy. Judas could NEVER bow his heart before such a God!

Well, we've isolated the three main suspects and we've determined their motives- fear, jealousy, and greed. Is the case now wrapped up? I don't think so. I began this sermon by deliberately quoting from *Murder on the Orient Express*. True to form, Inspector Poirot unravels the crime and exposes the killer- the ending was vintage Christie, a stunner to everyone. There were twelve suspects in the train coach. The victim was stabbed twelve times. The killer was- ALL of them. EACH one of them was the murderer; EACH one had a motive; and EACH one had wielded that knife and deliberately stabbed the victim- ALL TWELVE had corporately committed the crime.

In the same way, all of US are on that train and Jesus Christ is the murder victim. We are all more than suspects in that car- we are ALL the murderers. EACH of us in our own way, through our own moral cowardice and lack of adherence to the truth, EACH of us in our jealousy and envy of each other, EACH of us in our selfishness and greed- EACH of us placed those nails in his body and killed him- deliberately and decisively.

You see, it wasn't just Caiaphas and the Jews who put Christ to death, it wasn't just Pilate and the political powers of that age, or even the traitorous Judas. Rather, it was hypocrites like you and me who murdered Jesus, nailing him to that cross. We can't excuse ourselves and place all the blame on any two or three individuals for that responsibility must be shared by every person ever born into this world.

Sure the moral cowardice of Pontius Pilate helped nail Jesus to that tree, but so does the moral cowardice that you and I exhibit when WE are forced to make a decision between some issue of honor and principle, and that of personal expediency. None of us ever wants to rock the boat, none of us wants to upset the system even when the system may be wrong or corrupt because it just may jeopardize OUR jobs, OUR security, OUR futures. Let's face it, Pilate is every bit ourselves and his cowardice is our cowardice as well.

The jealousy and envy of Caiaphas and the high priests helped put Jesus to death, but so does all the jealousy and envy WE feel at the success and good fortune of others. We're every bit as protective of our OWN status and way of life as those religious leaders were and just as threatened when others put them at risk. And our response is really no different- we will preserve our authority and self-respect at any cost- ANY cost! Yes, Caiaphas is every one of us and his jealousy is every bit our own.

Yes, the greed of Judas Iscariot helped crucify Jesus Christ, but so does all the greed in our OWN lives. Selfishness and greed taint every heart and tinge every passion; they infect every one of our thoughts and motives so that if we thought we could steal something from someone and know with complete assurance that we would get away with it, we would probably do it. Again, Judas was not alone in betraying his Master for EVERYONE of us has betrayed him at different times. EACH of us is a Judas and HIS greed is very much our OWN.

Friends, make no mistake about it. In no way can any of us indict the Romans or the Jews or even Judas for the greatest murder in the history of the world without ALSO seeing OURSELVES as Pilate, as Caiaphas, as Judas Iscariot. The blood that Pilate could not wash from his hands stains our own hands this evening, and it is that SAME blood, the blood of JESUS, the blood of the VICTIM, the blood of GRACE AND FORGIVENESS that ALONE can ever make them clean. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, on this night of nights, grant us the grace to truly become transparent to ourselves, that we might see ourselves as we truly are, even as YOU regard us. Help us to see that the same fear, the same pride, and the same avarice and greed that helped put Jesus to death two thousand years ago continues to put Christ to death EVERY DAY through our OWN stupid fear and pride and greed. Deliver us from our complicity and may we trust in your mercy and grace to cleanse us from our sin so that not only will our hands be cleansed of its stain but our HEARTS as well. In his name we pray. Amen.