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Luke 18:9-14

THE HANDS OF THE PASSION – HANDS OF REPENTANCE

INI

It's been a busy day already. Up to this point, you have gotten out of bed, taken a shower, brushed your teeth, shaved, gone to the refrigerator, made some meals, eaten them, gone to work, read your e-mails, driven your car, and come to church. These are all mundane activities that we do every day. What do they have in common? They are all accomplished by using our hands. What would we do without our hands? Did you spend five minutes today thanking God for the use of your hands? Probably not. We simply take them for granted.

We have come to another Lenten season where we focus our attention on our Savior and his suffering and death. We can approach it in many ways. We can look at people. We can look at places. We can look at prophecies fulfilled. We can look at phrases spoken by the people at the time of our Lord. We can approach the subject in many ways, but the focus must always be upon our Lord Jesus and what he did for us. The worst thing we can do is look at the failures and sins of Judas, Peter, Pontius Pilate, Caiphaz, soldiers, and others and say, "I'm glad that I'm not like them." We see that we are guilty of the same sins and many more. This year we are going to focus on hands, hands that can be guilty of sin and hands that reach out to God for the forgiveness of our sins.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. It is a day of repentance. You've heard of repentance, haven't you? The Advent season is a penitential season. Unfortunately, most people in America don't think so. They are too busy getting ready for Christmas. We confess our sins every Sunday, and receive Holy Absolution, but don't really get all that excited about it. It is often just something that we do without thinking about it. Properly observed, Ash Wednesday is here to prepare our hearts for the Lenten season. Our Lord Jesus will suffer, bleed, and die. He does that for you and for me. He comes to take away our sins. He comes to bring us peace with God. He comes to restore Paradise. He comes to fulfill the Father's plan of salvation. Unless he voluntarily offers up his life on the cross, we are still in our sins. He prepares our hearts for this gift by showing us our sins and our complete inability to save ourselves.

Tonight, we will look at two men. They were as different as night and day in their attitudes toward God and toward sin. Our text is a familiar one. It is the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday. We've heard it before. Tonight, I want you to picture their hands and the connection between the actions of their hands and the attitudes of their hearts. What does it mean to have HANDS OF REPENTANCE?

We go to the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of worship for the community of Israel. Two people have come to the Temple for the same purpose: to pray. Both will start their prayer with the same word, "God," but that is where the similarity ends.

The first man was a Pharisee. Pharisees were the spiritual elite of Jewish society. They had memorized the Law of Moses and were quick to point out how well they knew it. They were used to debating the finer points of the Law every day answering such questions as to the precise second that the Sabbath began. They were wealthy and well-respected among the community. Sadly, they saw themselves as better than most, if not all, of their fellow Jews. We can imagine this Pharisee standing in a prominent place in the temple courts so that others could see him easily.

He prayed, "God, I thank you..." That was a good beginning. If only his prayer would have ended there. But he will continue, and we see that his prayer really wasn't a prayer of thanksgiving at all. "God, I thank you that I am not like

other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Were his hands folded or lifted up to the sky? We don’t know. I picture them either clapping for himself or giving himself a giant pat on the back. He looked fondly upon himself and his supposed keeping of the Law. He wasn’t a robber. He wasn’t an adulterer. In his mind, he had kept all the commandments faithfully.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true either. He actually felt that he had gone above and beyond the demands of God’s Law. Back in high school or college, sometimes students will approach their teachers and ask if there is anything they can do for “extra credit.” Some may want to erase a bad grade and others simply want the highest grade possible. This man wanted more than an A plus. He wanted an A plus plus and felt that he had earned it. “I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” Fasting was commanded on only one day a year, the day of Atonement. He fasted twice a week, every Monday and Thursday. That surely made him 103 days better than his fellow Jews. And then he gave a tenth of everything. Tithing, giving ten percent of your income back to God was commanded. This man would give ten percent of everything. If a plant had ten leaves, he’d give one back to God. No one else would be that brilliant to even think of doing something like that, but he would!

If you see any kind of building project, like a hospital, you will have a plaque of major donors. There are people who donated in memory of a loved one, a spouse or parents or others. You will also have some anonymous donors. They gave and chose not to have their names listed on that plaque. They simply gave out of love. The Pharisee would never donate anonymously. He wanted everyone to know what he did. Others would see how great he really was.

The one thing that we see is that there was no acknowledgement of his sins. He felt that he was better than everyone else. He compared himself to those he considered the worst of the worst. Most of us will look pretty good compared to Hitler or Stalin or other mass murderers. He willfully blinded himself to the standard of God’s Law that demands total perfection even in our thoughts. He may have thought of himself as someone very special in his relationship to God, but in the end, he went home empty-handed.

And then there was that other man. Nobody really noticed him because he didn’t want to be noticed. He stood in the background at a distance, perhaps in the shadows. He didn’t want to call any attention to himself. His chin was buried in his chest. His hands were clenched into fists as he beat his breast. He knew what he had done, and he was ashamed. He was a tax collector. Tax collectors were considered to be the lowest of the low. Tax collectors were Jewish people who worked for the Roman government collecting taxes. They were known for cheating the people. You paid the Romans their cut and you took the rest for yourself. And they took a lot for themselves. Jesus would call one tax collector, Matthew, to be an apostle. He invited another tax collector, Zacchaeus, to eat with him. More tax collectors came to know Jesus as the Savior when Matthew invited them to a banquet and Jesus ate with them.

This tax collector knew his sins. One can imagine the turmoil of his soul. “I did it again. I said that I was going to turn over a new leaf. I wanted to live a good life, one pleasing to God, but I failed again. I have a lot of money, but what does that do? I don’t deserve God’s love. I don’t deserve God’s favor. I’ve failed as a husband, a father, a son, a member of this community. I want to change my life. I want to do what is right. I have nothing to offer God but my sins. I pray, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

I’m sure he knew some people who were really crooks and scoundrels. He doesn’t compare himself to them. He doesn’t come up with a litany of his own supposed good works like being kind to dogs and such. He stares into the mirror of God’s law and sees his sin for what it is. He sees his helplessness. He knows that he cannot keep the law perfectly as God demands. He knows that he deserves God’s punishment now and in eternity. The only thing that he can do is to plead for mercy.

It wasn’t a long prayer. It wasn’t filled with all kinds of flowery language trying to get God’s attention. It was a powerful prayer because it was genuine. It came from the heart. It showed true humility. And it was a prayer that would

be rewarded. Jesus said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This man realized the holiness of God. This man realized the justice of God. That is something that we often forget. God is a God of perfect justice. He demands that every sin be punished. Sinful man cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. Atonement must be made for sin and we can't do it. Not a single one of the Old Testament sacrifices could pay for a single sin. They were there to remind the people of their sins and to point to one who would take away their sin forever. Yes, God is a God of love, but for many that means that he simply overlooks sin, sends everyone to heaven, and says, "Boys will be boys!" No, God must punish sin. That is why the Lenten season is so important. God takes it seriously, so seriously that he would offer nothing less than his very best, his own Son, to take away the sin of the world. Jesus died for your sins. He died for my sins.

So, you ask, "which one of the two am I?" We want to quickly answer, the tax collector. After all, you are here this evening. You've had a busy day, yet you still took the time to get dressed for church and drive over here. You put some money in an envelope and donated it for the work of the church. You're happy to be here, and you know that the sermon was going to be about repentance!

Yet you might be looking around and seeing empty pews. You might be thinking, "Well, at least I came. I don't know what excuse others had this evening, but I'm here. I ought to get some credit for that." The truth is that we are both Pharisee and tax collector at various times. We will never purge the Pharisee out of our system. It is too ingrained in us. We will always look at ourselves as better than some. And we think deep down that God owes us something for that. We will never have a 100% trust in Jesus' merits for us. That is why we need him in our lives every day.

Jesus told this story for everyone. He didn't tell it merely to Pharisees or disciples. He told it to people "Who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else." Yes, he told it to people who look a lot like us.

There isn't a day that goes by that we don't need to fold our hands and pray, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" Then we look to the one who told this story, the one who did keep the Law of God perfectly in our place, the one who offered up his life to pay for each and every sin we have committed, even those we have forgotten or were unaware, the one who allowed himself to be humiliated and executed, so that we might have life. He extends his hands to offer us forgiveness. He gives us his very body and blood as his personal assurance. We can go home this evening, knowing that we are forgiven and loved and in God's hands. May God bless you all! AMEN

INI

If you were a member of a Lutheran church 100 years ago, the chances were pretty good that you had at least one man in the congregation with the name of Adolph. Many Lutherans were German, and Adolph was a popular name. Then came a man named Hitler and Adolph wasn't so popular anymore. I can say that in 42 years of the ministry, I have never baptized any boy with the name of Adolph. Nor have I baptized anyone with the name of Benedict, and I don't know anyone who has named his son Judas. You would never name your son Judas. That name is synonymous with betrayal. Someone with the name Judas would always have to defend himself from all kinds of taunts and insults. You wouldn't do that to your son.

The story of Judas is an interesting one. He is the disciple that was willing to betray our Lord Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. What made him do it? Was he so evil that he couldn't help himself? Was he one of those children who was always in trouble, a child who tortured animals, whose parents wondered what they had done wrong? In all probability, the answer to those things is "No!"

Who was Judas? He is called Judas Iscariot. That means simply that he was a man from the town of Kerioth. If that is true, then Judas was the only apostle from the province of Judea. All the others were from the northern province of Galilee. Judas was not merely a disciple. He was called to be an apostle, one of the Twelve. He was with our Lord Jesus for three and a half years. He had the opportunity to hear Jesus' sermons. He had the opportunity to witness Jesus' amazing miracles. He had the opportunity to see the gracious works of love that our Savior did each and every day. Judas went on missionary trips with the twelve and with the 72. He served along with Peter, James, John, Matthew, and the rest. He would be there in the Upper Room as Jesus would celebrate the Passover with all the apostles.

But something was not right. Judas was going to betray his Lord. In fact, he had already agreed to do that before they sat down to eat. Betrayal is a horrible thing, isn't it? We know that people do horrible, evil things and we will expect that at times. People rob and kill others. People hurt others by their words and their actions. If someone cuts us off in traffic, we might get angry, but it's usually someone we don't even know. But betrayal is especially painful. Betrayal comes from someone close to us, a friend or a member of your family. It would be one thing if you found out that your husband was having an affair. It would be far worse if you found out that he was having an affair with your best friend or your sister. Betrayal means that you secretly try to hurt someone close to you, to expose their secrets that they have shared with you.

People have tried to ask what made Judas do what he did. Was he disillusioned with Jesus? We know that the apostles had this idea of Jesus setting up an earthly kingdom and giving them positions of power and prominence. Was Judas disappointed that this didn't appear to be the case? Did Judas view Jesus as a false prophet? Did he expect Jesus to take part in some public uprising against the Romans? Some of that could be true, but the simplest explanation is that greed got the best of Judas. Greed was the finger that Satan took hold of and eventually took his whole body and soul.

You understand greed, don't you? The desire for money. You can never get enough. You always want more and more, and you will do anything to get it. Judas was used to working with money. He was the treasurer of the group. There were always expenses for food and lodging. Many people would provide money so that Jesus and the apostles could travel freely. Someone would pay the bills at the end of the day, and that someone was Judas.

We know that Judas started skimming off the top. Maybe he had bills to pay himself. Maybe he found himself in debt. Maybe he felt that he wasn't making what he should, and he deserved more. Maybe he thought that he would

simply borrow a couple of dollars and pay it back later. But he wasn't caught! It became so much easier the next time to take a few more dollars. Something that happened once would now become a pattern.

The members of the Sanhedrin wanted Jesus dead. They saw him as a threat to their authority. They had been trying for three years to have Jesus arrested and killed. They knew that Jesus would be coming to Jerusalem for the Passover. Would this be the time to carry out their evil plans? They decided that they wouldn't do it at this time. They saw the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. They saw the huge crowd of people who followed Jesus and those who came out of the city to greet him. They saw the people spreading their cloaks and palm branches and heard them saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." They had decided that they were not going to kill Jesus then because the people might riot.

Jesus would teach publicly in the Temple courts that week. The Pharisees and Sadducees took turns trying to trap Jesus in his own words, but they failed miserably. They wanted him dead so badly, but they just couldn't arrest him in front of the crowds. What would they do? And then Judas came to them. He said, "I know where you can find him. I can deliver him to you, and I can do it at night. You can arrest him and do whatever you have to do and by the time the people find out about it, he will already have been tried and judged. Are you interested?"

We know that Judas was greedy. When Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus with a very costly perfume, Judas argued that it was truly a waste of money. It was worth a year's wages. It should have been sold and given to the poor. But we know Judas' real motives. The Holy Spirit tells us that Judas did not care about the poor. He wanted the money so that he could take more for himself.

And so, Judas wanted more! He was willing to betray our Lord Jesus, his master, for a certain sum of money. They settled on thirty pieces of silver. Now thirty pieces of silver may or may not seem like a lot of money. In those days it was worth about four months wages. We have certainly heard of people being kidnapped and held for ransom for millions of dollars. Thirty pieces of silver was a common price for a common slave. Judas probably could have held out for more, but he wanted Jesus gone. Thirty pieces of silver would fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah hundreds of years before.

Yes, it had been coming for some time. As Jesus gave his Bread of Life discourse after the feeding of the 5000 a year before this, Jesus said, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." Jesus knew what was coming, and he knew who was going to do it. Jesus would give warning after warning. Imagine the scene at the last supper. Jesus had already washed his disciples' feet. They were eating the Passover supper when Jesus dropped a bombshell that would get everyone's attention: "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me."

You could have heard a pin drop. The apostles couldn't believe that such a thing could take place. They all knew one another. They had been with Jesus through good times and bad. They knew Jesus' love for them. Who could do such a thing? They stared at each other, wondering which one of them he meant.

And then they started asking the question, "Surely, not I, Lord?" They began searching their own hearts. They knew their sinfulness. They knew what they were capable of doing. They knew the temptations that Satan had placed in their way throughout their lives and they knew their failures. Could they be capable of doing such a thing? They wanted to know. They did not want to betray their Lord.

That's a question that each of us must ask ourselves. Am I capable of doing such a thing? Would I be willing to betray my Lord for thirty pieces of silver? For more, for less? Have my secret sins gone unrepented? Are they eating away at my faith and corroding my soul? Is greed the sin crouching at my door? Or is there something else that I try to hide from everyone, including God and myself? There is no sin that we are not capable of committing. Sadly, I have seen many people willing to betray our Savior for far less than thirty pieces of silver. How many people have stood before the

church and made confirmation vows that Jesus was the most important person in the world to them and that they would suffer anything, even death, rather than fall away from him? You know many of those people. Some may even be in your own family. It didn't happen overnight. Satan used one thing or another to lead them away from Christ. Jesus became less and less important to them. They neglected feeding their faith with Word and Sacrament and lost their most important treasure.

Jesus continued to warn Judas. There was still time to turn back. Judas may have felt that Jesus heard a rumor somewhere, but he didn't know which one of them was the betrayer. He was one of the Twelve, still pretty good odds. But then Jesus let Judas know that he knew. "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." And he gave it to Judas.

When Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. Judas had given Satan a finger. Now Satan took complete control. Judas would go out to do the bidding of the prince of darkness. The words "and it was night" are chilling. This is more than a designation of time. It shows the horrible spiritual condition in the heart of the traitor. The former apostle goes out into the night in the service of the powers of darkness to accomplish a deed fit only for the blackest night.

The other apostles really didn't know what was going on. They thought that Judas was going out to buy some more food or to give something to the poor. He could hide his true intentions from them, but he could not hide them from God. Judas would betray our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane with a kiss. Sadly, he would be filled with remorse and commit suicide. He didn't believe that Jesus could or would forgive him.

Jesus came to die for people like Judas. He would die for people like Peter who would later deny Jesus three times that evening. He would die for people like the other apostles who would all run away. He would die for people like you and for me. Judas spurned the forgiveness won by Jesus on the cross. But we can't let that happen to us. Jesus' hands are still pierced with the nails, the wounds of love that do not go away. No matter what sins you have committed, whether they are open or secret, He was willing to suffer and die for you, being betrayed by one of his disciples and forsaken by his Father in heaven so that you and I could have eternal life. Praise be to God! AMEN.

INI

Come on, you know that it was Peter, didn't you? If we read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we hear that one of Jesus' disciples drew a sword and cut off the ear of one of the high priest's servants. Only John tells us that it was Peter. But we would have expected that. Just like back in third grade when you heard that one of the children got in trouble, you knew that it was little Johnny. It just sounds like something that Peter would do. John is the only one who tells us that it is Peter because his Gospel was written after Peter's death. There still could have been repercussions while Peter was still alive.

We know Peter so well. I love Peter. He was one of Jesus' first and closest followers. He was rash and impetuous and often took the lead. That could be both good and bad. He was the unofficial leader of the apostles. He experienced both the highest highs and the lowest lows. When Jesus asked the Twelve who they thought he was, it was Peter who gave the answer, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." When Jesus came out to his disciples at night, walking on the water, it was Peter who asked the Lord if he could also walk on the water with him. And when Jesus said in the Upper Room that all the disciples would abandon him, it was Peter who was the first to pledge that he would die with Jesus rather than disown him.

But then there were the other times that happened almost immediately afterward. After Jesus told the disciples what being the Christ meant, that he would have to suffer, die, and rise again, it was Peter who took him aside and said, No, Lord, this will never happen to you!" Jesus had to tell him, "Out of my sight, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but rather the things of men." Even though Peter was only one of two people who ever walked on water, he took his eyes off Jesus and immediately began to sink. And Peter's promise to never deny or disown Jesus? Well, we will see how well that went.

Peter would remember his failures, but he would keep making many of the same mistakes again and again. We identify with that, don't we? We fall into the same sins repeatedly. Usually during the Lenten season, we will look at Peter's denial of our Lord. We know that Peter had promised that he would never deny Jesus. Jesus told him that he would deny Jesus three times that very evening, and Peter did, not after being tortured for hours by soldiers, but rather by being asked by a servant girl, "Didn't I see you with him?"

We will focus on another incident with Peter that evening, one that preceded his denial in the high priest's courtyard. This took place in the Garden of Gethsemane after Jesus had celebrated the Passover with his disciples and instituted the Lord's Supper. Judas had already gone out to betray Jesus.

Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John with him into the Garden. He asked them to watch and pray. Jesus knew what was going to happen. We know that the apostles couldn't stay awake. And suddenly, it happened. A large crowd of people were there for one reason. They were there to arrest Jesus and bring him to trial. The crowd was made up of all kinds of people. There were members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council who wanted Jesus dead and would conduct that kangaroo court that would take place that evening. There were Roman soldiers and there were temple guards. These people were carrying lanterns and armed with swords and clubs. They were ready to hunt down Jesus if he tried to run. And they were led by Judas who would betray our Lord with a kiss.

The odds didn't look very good. There was an armed mob and there was Jesus and eleven apostles. The apostles weren't trained soldiers. They were fishermen and normal citizens from Galilee. If there was going to be a conflict, it wouldn't last very long, humanly speaking.

But we are going to see that it wasn't going to deal with "humanly speaking." This was the very Son of God that was being arrested. This was the eternal God who created the heavens and the earth by the power of his Word. This was the God who gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, the ability to speak to the mute, the ability to walk to the lame, cleansing to the lepers, fed the multitudes with a few fish and pieces of bread, and even raised the dead. If Jesus would use his divine power, he could have wiped them all out with the blink of an eye. He could have called down twelve legions of angels from heaven to prevent his arrest if he so chose.

The mob thought that they were in control. They were wrong and Jesus would show them. He would not try to run away and head for the hills. He would step forward and ask the question: "Who is it you want?" Jesus knew what was going to happen to him and he knew that answer to the question he asked. They wanted him. They had been trying for three years to capture him and get rid of him permanently. We would expect that the soldiers would rush forward, bind Jesus, and take him back to the city.

But that wasn't what happened, was it? Not yet! When Jesus announced, "I am he!" the crowd fell over like bowling pins. Jesus was showing them who really was in charge. If he so chose, the people would be stuck to the ground, paralyzed, unable to move. The only reason that they were able to do anything was because Jesus would allow it. All these things had to happen as far as our salvation was concerned.

Jesus was concerned about the apostles. He had trained them for three years and they were important to him. They would be his witnesses after Jesus death and resurrection. They were not ready to deal with everything that would happen to Jesus in the next few hours. He would protect them from harm. He said to the crowd, "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." Yes, this would be the fulfillment of another prophecy that Jesus himself had spoken. He would care for his own. We have that same promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus our Lord.

The apostles would be safe. Jesus had taken care of that. But then Peter decided that he would take matters into his own hands. He saw this as a time to fight. He drew a sword and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. That really wasn't a smart thing to do, was it? We ask, "What was Peter thinking?" One answer was that he really wasn't thinking at all. He saw Jesus surrounded by hostile men who wanted to harm him, and his instincts and emotions took over. And then there was the other possibility that Peter had been thinking. He saw the crowd and he determined that he was going to go to his death fighting for Jesus. He had promised that back in the Upper Room. He could see that Jesus needed help, and he was going to be the one who helped him.

Now there is nothing wrong with helping a friend. But Jesus didn't need any help. What he was going to undergo had to happen. This was God's plan of salvation. Jesus had told the apostles a number of times what had to happen. He had to be arrested. He had to suffer. He had to die. And he had to rise again on the third day. He spoke very plainly about these things. But the apostles weren't listening. They had their own ideas of how things should go. They were going to have glory and wealth and power and a kingdom in Jerusalem. They were going to be Jesus' cabinet in that kingdom. There would be no suffering, no death, no arrest, not if they could prevent it. And Peter was the one who would set things right!

He thought that he would help Jesus. In doing so, he demonstrated a lack of understanding, or even worse, a lack of trust in God. The will of God is not going to be accomplished through our use of blunt force. The Christian cause will never be advanced by our use of swords or guns or any other weapons. Sadly, the Church has tried such things during the Crusades and the Inquisition. We know that abortion is abhorrent, taking the lives of unborn children. There have been a couple of instances in the past where people claiming to be Christian have bombed abortion clinics. Such things are wrong. Christianity is a religion of peace. The Kingdom of God is advanced not by force, but rather by the

message of the Gospel, telling the story of Jesus, the Son of God who came to earth to be our Savior. That and that alone will change human hearts and bring peace to troubled consciences.

Does God need my help to accomplish his purposes? That is a trap that Christians will often fall into. There are a lot of things that we don't necessarily like as far as our country goes. There is the temptation to think that if we just elect the right leaders or pass the right legislation, then our country will get back to the good old days. We all want to see more people in church. How can we accomplish that? There is always the temptation to make the church something else, having all kinds of programs that have nothing to do with the Gospel or talking less about sin. We can give them the Gospel some other time after we have them hooked. I've seen it happen many times.

We can be good citizens. We can do things to help the poor and needy. These are good things, but God does not need our help. He wants us to trust in him. He wants us to be grounded in Word and Sacrament. He wants us to share our Savior. But the success of the Gospel does not come from us. It comes from God working through the Means of Grace.

Jesus reprimanded Peter. "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" Our salvation was not carried out by Peter or James or John. It was not carried out by Mary Magdalene or Jesus' mother Mary. It was not carried out by any of Jesus' disciples even adding a single bit. It was carried out by Jesus alone and that was the way that it had to be. God's plan demanded that Jesus be arrested and brought to trial and beaten and whipped and mocked and nailed to a cross and forsaken by God himself. Jesus would have to drink and to drain the cup of his Father's wrath upon sin. He would have to do it alone. He had to carry out every single horrible thing in order to pay for the sin of the world. And his willingness to do it shows how much he loved us.

John tells us a number of things that happened in the Garden that night, but he doesn't tell us what happened to the high priest's servant whose name was Malchus. St. Luke tells us that Jesus reached out his hand and touched the servant's ear and healed him. That was Jesus' final miracle before his crucifixion. Why did he do it? Because that is who Jesus was and is. He came to seek and to save. He came to heal broken bodies and broken hearts. He is full of compassion, love, and mercy. He accomplished our salvation alone, without the hands of misguided zeal, stretching out his hands to redeem us from our sins, so that by his wounds we might be healed. AMEN.

INI

If you were looking for villains in the Passion story, you would certainly have many from which to choose. We think immediately of Judas who was willing to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. You have Peter who wanted to fight for Jesus and drew his sword, cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant and later denying our Lord three times. You have the rest of the apostles who all ran away. You have Pontius Pilate who knew that Jesus was innocent, but nevertheless sentenced him to death.

Yes, these men all did bad things, but were they completely evil? Judas was filled with remorse and refused to keep the money he was given. Peter went out and wept bitterly. The rest of the apostles felt shamed by their actions. And Pilate at least tried to set Jesus free until he realized that it was either going to be Jesus' life or his own. Yes, we see that all these men did bad things. We won't minimize their sins, but we see that they all had an inner struggle.

Tonight, we will see a man who had no struggle at all. We could describe him as cold, calculated, and completely ruthless. As we study the Scriptures, we don't find anything redeeming about him at all. He was a politician concerned only about his own power. He would do anything to keep it, even killing the very Son of God. His name was Caiphas. The saddest thing about it was that Caiphas was the high priest of Israel, the man chosen to represent God before the people and the people before God.

The office of High Priest was very important. The first High Priest was Aaron, the brother of Moses. He was the leader of worship in the temple. He was the only one allowed into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. He was to be a man who represented God. But the office of High Priest had become corrupted. It could be bought and sold. Caiphas was the son-in-law to Annas who had previously served as High Priest. He was a man who was totally unspiritual. He was a man concerned only about himself and power. He didn't care about his fellow Jews. He didn't care about God. He was what we would describe as a hypocrite, someone who pretends to be someone or something else. This evening we will look at the HANDS OF HYPOCRISY.

We first meet Caiphas shortly after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. All of Jerusalem was buzzing. People were starting to think that Jesus just might be the Son of God. There was an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin. What would they do about the Jesus problem? What if the people all started to follow Jesus? Caiphas had the solution. "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." He did not want anything to upset the applecart. He didn't want Jesus leading some sort of uprising against the Romans that would surely fail. Then the Romans would take away the power that the Sanhedrin currently enjoyed. This was indeed a prophecy. One man would die for the people, but not in the way that Caiphas and his cronies would imagine. Jesus would die for all the people as he went to the cross, fulfilling his Father's will.

As we have noted, they hoped to kill him during the Passover, but the crowds were too large. Judas then stepped in and promised that he would deliver Jesus at night. They could do what they had to do before most of the people were awake. And that was what they did.

There had to be a trial. They had to make it look legal, but it was not. There were a number of violations of the law. First, a trial for one's life could not be held at night. The trial should have been held at the temple but was held at the house of Caiphas to ensure secrecy. The verdict had already been determined. There was no doubt that at the end of the trial, Jesus would be judged guilty of something and condemned to death. The question was: "What charge can we bring against him to find him guilty of the death penalty?"

There were a number of witnesses brought in. These people were carefully coached as to what to say. Yet their stories did not agree. Now you had to have at least two witnesses agree on something, especially when you are talking about a man's life. Finally, some people came up with the story that Jesus said, "I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man." If you recall from last Sunday, Jesus said that when he cleansed the temple the first time. You also know that he was speaking about his resurrection that would take place after his crucifixion. But even then, the false witnesses could not agree.

Caiphas is getting very frustrated. Was he more upset with Jesus or with his cronies who were botching this golden opportunity to get rid of Jesus? He stood up and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" Jesus gave no answer. Why should he say anything? If you can't find two paid false witnesses who could agree on anything, there is no need to say a word. His majestic silence said everything.

Now Caiphas has to raise the stakes. He is not going to let someone else blunder and somehow make it possible for Jesus to go free. He will take matters into his own hands. He now puts Jesus under oath. "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" It was a simple yes or no question, but also devilishly clever. If Jesus said nothing, it would be a tacit denial. If he said no, it would be an actual denial. If he said yes, that would be a game changer. It would give Caiphas the evidence he needed to put Jesus to death.

Jesus knew the question and he knew the answer that he had to give. This was not the time for silence. This was the time to testify to the truth. Now was the time to carry out the Father's plan of salvation. He would suffer at the hands of these evil men as the Scriptures had foretold and as Jesus had told his disciples. "I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." There would be a time when their roles would be reversed. Caiphas would stand before Jesus the Judge of all mankind. But now, the Scriptures would have to be fulfilled.

Caiphas couldn't believe his ears. This was everything he could have ever hoped for. Inwardly he is turning cartwheels of joy. Outwardly he tears his robe in a fake display of moral outrage. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. That was blasphemy! "Why do we need any more witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy!" Then these men took off their masks of hypocrisy. These people who paraded themselves as paragons of virtue condemned our Lord as worthy of death. They began to spit on him. They blindfolded him and punched them with their fists and said, "Prophecy!"

Our Lord Jesus suffered much at the hands of the religious leaders and he would suffer more at the hands of the Romans. But the big question is why. Why did they hate him so much? Why did they want him dead? Why was Caiphas willing to sell his soul to achieve this goal? We've already mentioned the political reasons. They were afraid of losing power. They loved controlling the people and making all the money at the Temple.

But there was more than that. That reason was spiritual. They liked to be considered godly, the best of the best. They wanted people to see them in a favorable light. They wanted to be able to look down their noses upon people who weren't as good as they were. They wanted to believe that they deserved to be in heaven on the basis of their supposed good works.

And then Jesus turned their comfortable world upside down. Instead of patting them on their backs and telling them and everyone else how good they were, he called them to repent. He called them whitewashed tombs, a brood of vipers, children of Satan. That got their blood boiling. Jesus called them out for their hypocrisy, not to embarrass them, but to lead them to repent, to see that they could not save themselves, to see that their only way to heaven was by trusting in Jesus. Those words of Jesus telling Caiphas that their roles would be reversed, and Jesus would be the judge was meant to call Caiphas and all the members of the Sanhedrin to repentance.

Caiphas would reject Jesus' invitation and warning. We see the dangers of hypocrisy. A hypocrite cares only about what people can see on the outside. He does not want people to know what is really there hidden away in his heart. He wants to believe that he does not need to repent because he has no sin.

The apostle John wrote in his first letter: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Is that true of you? Do you believe that you are without sin? We say that we are sinners. We confess that, but do we always believe that? Are we guilty of hypocrisy? Isn't it easy for us to say, "I might not be perfect, but at least I'm not as bad as (fill in the blank)? Isn't it easy to condemn someone else for a sin that we struggle with personally? We love to rate sins and the sins that others commit are so much worse than the ones that we commit. How many times have we seen politicians condemn someone while they were guilty of committing the same sins in even greater numbers?

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times. "The church is full of hypocrites!" That's true isn't it? I'm one, you are another. We are all hypocrites to some degree. We want to project a positive image to others. We don't want people to know what is really in our hearts. We might flatter a person when we are speaking to them, but as soon as they leave, we are ready to spew all kinds of venom against them. We can be very good at hiding our true feelings and motives from others, but we can't hide them from God.

God knows everything that is in our hearts. He knows the greed, the lust, the anger, the hate, the envy, the thanklessness, the lack of love, the utter hypocrisy. The church is not a museum for saints. It is a hospital for sinners, people who have offended a just and holy God every day by our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Yes, we are called to lead a holy life, and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, we do. But we will never be perfect this side of heaven, so we don't pretend that we are. We are forgiven. Christ's blood covers all our sins, even those that we would never want to reveal to anyone else. We are sinless in the sight of God. That is what is important. How we look to anyone else outwardly is not important.

Caiphas was a hypocritical High Priest, but we have a High Priest who was always in control. He was both Priest and sacrifice who would suffer at the hands of hypocritical evil men so that he could free our souls from eternal death. He spoke the truth because he is the Truth and the truth sets us free. AMEN.

Matthew 27:27-31

THE HANDS OF THE PASSION – HANDS OF BRUTALITY

INI

Have you ever been bullied? I hope not, but I'm afraid that all of you have been at least one time in your life in some way. If you have been bullied, you will never forget those who hurt you. You find it very hard to forgive them. Years later the hurt still remains. Bullying is a pattern of behavior that is used to leverage power or control over another person.

There are basically three types of bullying. The first is verbal bullying. It involves name calling and threats of violence. It might be shaming a person for how they look. Perhaps they are overweight or underweight. They might have a long nose or big ears. They might be awkward as their bodies just haven't adjusted yet. People will taunt you and others will join in. You get some sort of nickname that you don't like, and it sticks with you. With the rise of the internet today, it gets even worse. People can be anonymous and say all kinds of hateful, hurtful things. I am shocked at the kinds of things people say, even when someone has died.

The second kind of bullying takes place when a person is deliberately excluded or ostracized from a group. I can't imagine being a senior in high school going to a new school. You look for friends and no one will accept you. Sadly, the people that will automatically accept you are those who find themselves in all kinds of trouble. If you don't throw in with them, you often find yourself alone.

The final type of bullying occurs when there is actual violence. You are pushed, kicked, or punched. We have a real problem today with domestic violence. Women and children are beaten by their so-called husbands or boyfriends. These bullies often say that they are sorry, but they do it again and again. It takes really tough guys to beat up a woman or a child.

If we accept this definition, then we would have to admit that Jesus was the victim of all three types of bullying during his time on earth. The religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, called him a Samaritan and demon possessed. They tried to trap him in all kinds of questions. They tried to keep the people away from Jesus, spreading rumors about him, and embarrassing him publicly. And physical bullying? When we read the words of our text, we see far more than that. We see outright assault and violence close to murder.

It is one thing for a high school student to steal another student's lunch money or for mean girls to make fun of another. But it is entirely another thing to beat and bludgeon a man for the crime of preaching the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was bullied verbally and socially. Tonight, we see Jesus suffer the soldiers' HANDS OF BRUTALITY.

What we have this evening is actually the second instance of the hands of brutality in the Passion story. We heard the first one last Wednesday as our Lord was on trial at the hands of Caiphas and the Sanhedrin. After Jesus said under oath that he was the Son of God, he was declared guilty of blasphemy and the members of the Sanhedrin blindfolded him, punched him, mocked him, and spit on him. They then sent him to Pontius Pilate, demanding that he be crucified.

We will look at Pilate in more detail next week. We know that Pilate was a politician first and a humanitarian second. Pilate would determine that Jesus was innocent. Jesus may have been misguided, but he certainly was not guilty of the death penalty. And yet the Jewish mob was screaming that Jesus be crucified! Pilate would do a number of things to try and free Jesus. One thought that he had was to beat Jesus thoroughly so that the people would feel sorry for him

and say that he had enough and let him go free. Pilate would hand Jesus over to his whole company of soldiers, some 600 men, to do whatever they wanted with him. It would not be pretty.

The first thing the soldiers would do was to strip Jesus of his clothing and whip him. The whip would break open the skin and cause massive bleeding and internal injuries. You could imagine that the person would be hurting immensely. The scourging was so violent that the Jews would limit the number of lashes a person could receive to 39. The Romans had no limit. If a person survived that, he would die quickly from crucifixion if he hadn't died from the whip.

If you serve in the United States military, you often don't have a say in where you are going to serve. You serve where you are sent. I would imagine that most soldiers really don't want to go to Iraq or Afghanistan or other places where people are shooting at you. In the 1960's very few young men wanted to go to Vietnam. If you were a Roman soldier 2000 years ago, the last place you wanted to go was to Judea. You were hated by the Jews. They always kept talking about the Messiah who would come and drive them out. Dealing with the Jews was a real pain. You looked for a way to entertain yourselves. And here they had it!

They were going to have some fun. This Jesus claimed to be a king, so they were going to make him look like a king. They stripped him down and placed a scarlet robe on him, probably a soldier's coat. Then they made him a crown worthy of his kingship, a crown of thorns. They pressed it down nice and tight so that blood was flowing from his forehead. They made a staff of a reed and placed it in Jesus' hand. Then they bowed down before him and mocked him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Everyone took turns. If everyone was doing it, it must have been all right. They spit on him and beat him on the head again and again. And as they did all those things, the Scriptures were fulfilled. "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting."

I think that most fathers and mothers would tell their child that you need to stand up to a bully. Don't let him get away with it. Punch him in the mouth if you have to. He will back down. What had Jesus taught his followers? Turn the other cheek! Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! Do unto others what you would have them do unto you! Would Jesus practice what he preached? He would do more than that. He fulfilled the Scriptures. "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

The one thing that we know is that Jesus allowed these things to happen. He was God in human form. He had all power. He certainly could have wiped out all his enemies: Caiphias, the Sanhedrin, the soldiers, Pilate, and anyone in the mob crying out for his death. It wouldn't take much, just a single word. Or he could have let the holy angels take care of it for him. They were available at Jesus' beck and call. All he had to do was to give the word and they were toast!

But Jesus allowed himself to be brutalized. He offered his back. He allowed them to insult him in so many ways. He was the King of the Jews. He was the King of the Gentiles as well. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Yes, his name is above every name and at that name the time will come when every knee shall bow. We ask why. Why would Jesus allow himself to be so brutalized and degraded? Why doesn't he stand up and punch those bullies in the mouth?

He did it for you. He did it for me. This was the Father's plan of salvation that Jesus was determined to carry out. This was the cup of God's wrath that the Father had asked Jesus to drain, and he would drink every last drop. "It was the Lord's will to cause him to suffer." Jesus came to be our substitute. Because of our sin, he would endure the shame, the mocking, the beating, the suffering. He would go to the cross and stay there until every last sin was paid for in full. If Jesus refused, then there is no forgiveness of sins and God's wrath still remains on us. I would much rather face the wrath of the Roman soldiers than to face the wrath of God.

We think of how much our entire body hurts if we stub our toe or have a toothache or earache. We can't imagine the physical pain that Jesus went through, let alone the taunts and insults of people that he came to save. And it

would get worse. Jesus would be forsaken by the Father as he hung on the cross. For the first time in all eternity, he was separated from his Father's love and punished with hell itself so that you and I might have eternal life.

St. John Chrysostom, an early church father, explains why Jesus' entire body had to suffer at the hands of brutality. "Not only one of the Lord's members, but his entire body had to suffer the most dreadful pains. His head was wounded by the crown of thorns, by the blows of the fists, and by the reed: his face endured spittle and smiting; his entire body was scourged, stripped, and arrayed in a robe of shame; his hands held the reed; later his tongue had to taste vinegar and gall. Because sin dwells and is active in all our members, therefore Christ desired to suffer for all our sins in all his members."

Nobody likes a bully. A bully tries to leverage power and control over you. When he does so, you feel powerless to do anything. As we live in this world, we see all kinds of bullies. Sin is a bully, trying to lead us to break God's commandments. Satan is a bully, trying to tempt us to sin and accusing us when we fall. Because Jesus took our place, we don't have to worry about these bullies anymore. They can't demand our spiritual milk money. St. Paul tells us: "Sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace." We have the forgiving love of Christ. We listen to him, rather than sin and Satan. "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

As we see what Christ endured for us and won our forgiveness, we see true freedom. Peter tells us: "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God." Christ gives us the power to forgive our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to not seek revenge, but rather to pray for those who hate us and try to hurt us.

Most of the world does not know Christ. They deal with anger and frustration as they are bullied by sin and Satan. We know differently. We have a Savior who was bullied in our place so that we might enjoy eternal peace. Let's share the good news! AMEN.

INI

If someone were to ask you to name a famous Roman, you might struggle for awhile. It has probably been a long time since you studied world history and famous Romans usually don't work their way into your everyday conversation. You might answer Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus, or Nero, but you might draw a blank. And then it hits you. You say his name every Sunday as you confess the Creed. It is the governor of Judea during Jesus' ministry: Pontius Pilate.

Pontius Pilate is the most famous Roman of them all as far as the Christian story is concerned. Even though he was simply the governor of the province of Judea, he was the one who signed the order for Jesus to be crucified. We might think that he was a horrible or bloodthirsty man, but we don't really get that impression at all. He was a man who wanted justice to be served. The Romans prided themselves on justice. In fact, he knew that Jesus was innocent, yet he condemned him anyway.

Why did he do that? Why did he condemn a man that he knew was innocent? He didn't do it out of hate. He didn't do it out of spite. He did it for a reason that all of us can understand. He did it because it came down to Jesus' life or his own. He did it to save himself. Even though he washed his hands, thinking that they would no longer be stained with Jesus' blood, he was wrong. This evening we will look at HANDS OF SELF-PRESERVATION.

We know that Jesus was condemned to death by the Sanhedrin. The charge was blasphemy. Jesus said that he was the Son of God. The problem was that the Jews did not have the power to put him to death. They were under Roman rule. Only the Romans could carry out the death penalty. Therefore, they needed Pontius Pilate to give the order for Jesus to be crucified.

The Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate early in the morning. They were hoping that they could just hand Jesus over to him and Pilate would simply grant their request and crucify Jesus. Not so fast! There had to be charges against him. Now the charge that they had condemned him for was blasphemy. They knew that Pilate would simply laugh at that and go back to sleep. So, they had to come up with something more serious. They charged Jesus with subverting the people, with forbidding the payment of taxes, and of calling himself Christ, a king. These were serious charges and charges that Pilate would have to examine.

We know that the charges were false. They were lies. Pilate probably felt the same way. If he was a competent governor, and we believe that he was, he would have his finger on the pulse of what was happening in Judea. This may have been the first time he actually met Jesus, but he certainly would have heard about him. Everyone had heard about Jesus of Nazareth. The people were talking about his sermons and teachings and miracles. The Romans certainly would have spies who would go where Jesus was. They would listen to the contents of his sermons and determine whether he was trying to stir up some sort of rebellion against the Romans. If Jesus had been guilty of insurrection, the Romans would have arrested him and done something before this. Therefore, we must conclude that the Romans did not see Jesus as any kind of threat to them.

When Jesus first appeared before Pilate, Jesus said nothing. The chief priests and teachers of the law were accusing him of anything and everything, but Jesus said nothing. He didn't protest his innocence. He didn't plead for mercy. He didn't say a word in his own defense, and Pilate was amazed.

Jesus would open up when the two men were alone and the things he said made an even deeper impression on Pilate. "Are you the King of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say." Then Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world...the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth...you would have no power over me if it were not

given to you from above.” Pilate had never had anyone speak to him like that. He began to realize that Jesus was no ordinary human being.

If that was not enough, imagine how he felt when he received a message from his wife. “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal in a dream today because of him.” We all have dreams. Some of them are very vivid and we forget them almost immediately. But her dream stuck with her and Romans put great stock in dreams. She didn’t need anyone to interpret it for her. She knew what it meant. Don’t have anything to do with this innocent man. If you do, you’ll regret it.

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent. He should have simply released him with no charges. But Pilate is going to try a number of tactics which will all backfire on him. He tells the Jewish leaders to try Jesus according to their own law, but they wanted the death penalty. Then Pilate learns that Jesus is from Galilee. That’s Herod’s jurisdiction and Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem at that time. He would pawn him off on Herod. Now Herod wasn’t exactly the most popular person in Jerusalem. He was the one who beheaded John the Baptist that the people saw as a great prophet from God. He was not going to kill another prophet. Herod hoped that Jesus would do a miracle or two and when Jesus didn’t, Herod sent him back to Pilate.

So now what does Pilate do? There was a custom at that time of releasing a prisoner during the Passover festival. I’m sure that there were a number of candidates. The Jews didn’t like the Romans, and some were very vocal about it. There were political opponents who espoused rebellion against Rome and were imprisoned for that. They were very popular with the people, and the people would want such a person released to them.

Pilate would give the people a choice, but it would not be someone popular. He had a man named Barabbas, a notorious murderer. The choice would be an easy one. Some people might not like Jesus, but they certainly wouldn’t want a murderer released into their community where their wives and children lived. But the chief priests and elders wouldn’t let go. They convinced the crowd to release Barabbas and crucify Jesus.

Pilate would try one more thing. He thought that if he had Jesus beaten and whipped, that the crowd would take pity on Jesus and say that they had enough. We saw that last Wednesday. But that wouldn’t work either. The crowd became even more bloodthirsty. They demanded Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate brought out the battered and bloodied Jesus, wearing a crown of thorns and a purple robe and exclaimed, “Behold the man!” There was no pity for Jesus.

Pilate still was ready to let the innocent Jesus go, but then the Jewish leaders played their trump card. They shouted, “We have no king but Caesar!” They told Pilate that if he let Jesus go, they would go over his head. They would go to Rome and tell those in charge that Pilate let a rival king go free. In other words, Pilate would be deposed. If you were deposed as a Roman governor, there were two options, death or exile to some penal colony. You didn’t get to choose. He wasn’t going to have some cushy retirement, writing his memoirs.

So now Pilate realizes that it is his life or the life of a man he met only a couple of hours before. Jesus might be innocent, but Pilate values his own life. He has to decide, “Do I do what I know is right or do I do what I think is best for me? We know the answer Pilate gave. He took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your responsibility.” Then he gave the order, “Crucify him!”

Pilate had the hands of self-preservation. When it came down to it, he put his life above the life of our Lord. It was bad enough that Pilate condemned an innocent man. What made his actions even worse is that he condemned the sinless Son of God. We can say that Pilate was a coward. What made it even worse was that he was too much of a coward to admit his own cowardice.

Pilate wasn't a Christian. He was a pagan. His actions proved that power and authority was more important to him than anything else. He was an unbeliever and he acted like an unbeliever. That shouldn't surprise us. He dismissed Jesus' claim of being a king of truth and missed his opportunity to be part of an eternal kingdom.

What about us? It is so easy for us to condemn Pilate for condemning Jesus. How could he do that to an innocent man? But what if you were Pilate? What if you had to make that decision? What if it were your life or his? Would you be any different? What would you do if you found out that your job was between you and another person? Might you be tempted to spread some rumors about that other person so that you could keep that job? Do you have hands of self-preservation? Are you willing to anything and everything to keep what you have and if someone else gets hurt, even if they are innocent, so be it!

And your beliefs are pretty radical, aren't they? You claim to be a follower of this Jesus. We know that there are many in our society today that are also crying out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Are you willing to stand up for him? Are you willing to say, "He is innocent?" Or will you remain silent? You can come up with all kinds of excuses. "It wasn't the right time...I didn't want to get into an argument...I don't want to be ostracized or lose my friends...I don't want to lose my job...or fill in the blank."

Pilate was an unbeliever. That was his excuse. He didn't believe in Jesus. Do we have an excuse? Jesus says, "Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father in heaven." That's a scary thought that should make us shudder because we are all guilty of denying Jesus by our words or by our silence.

As we come to the end of our Lenten meditations, we take note of what Jesus did and didn't do in order to save us from sin, death, and eternal damnation. He allowed his enemies to arrest him. He allowed the Sanhedrin and Pilate to condemn him to death. He allowed the soldiers to beat him and humiliate him. He allowed himself to be crucified and forsaken on the cross to fulfill prophecy and to pay for the sin of the world. He allowed his life to be taken from him so that we might live forever in a world of perfect love. Praise God!

Pilate did one thing right. When Jesus was crucified, Pilate put a notice above the cross that read: "THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS!" We don't know whether this was mocking Jesus or one way to get back at the Jewish leaders, but it was true. Jesus is our eternal king who rules our hearts by faith and will bring us to heaven to reign with him eternally. May God bless our Holy Week worship! AMEN.