

Sermon Title: *Jesus on Trial*

**Luke 23:1-25**

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.<sup>2</sup>They began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.’<sup>3</sup>Then Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ He answered, ‘You say so.’<sup>4</sup>Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, ‘I find no basis for an accusation against this man.’<sup>5</sup>But they were insistent and said, ‘He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.’

<sup>6</sup>When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.<sup>7</sup>And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.<sup>8</sup>When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign.<sup>9</sup>He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer.<sup>10</sup>The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.<sup>11</sup>Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.<sup>12</sup>That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

<sup>13</sup>Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people,<sup>14</sup>and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.<sup>15</sup>Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.<sup>16</sup>I will therefore have him flogged and release him.’

<sup>18</sup>Then they all shouted out together, ‘Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!’<sup>19</sup>(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.)<sup>20</sup>Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again;<sup>21</sup>but they kept shouting, ‘Crucify, crucify him!’<sup>22</sup>A third time he said to them, ‘Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.’<sup>23</sup>But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.<sup>24</sup>So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.<sup>25</sup>He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

[I began by saying, “I am feeling a bit nervous, as this sermon feels a bit preachy. So, just a heads-up”]

There is a legend that on his famous trip to the Far East, the explorer Marco Polo was seized and brought before the dreadful conqueror Genghis Khan. Desperate for conversation, he began to tell the Khan the story of the gospel according to St Matthew. Genghis Khan liked the story and listened attentively, much to his storyteller’s relief, but as Marco Polo came to the events of Holy Week and told of Jesus’ betrayal, trial, scourging, and crucifixion, his fearsome host became more and more agitated. As soon as Marco Polo got to this part for today, of Jesus crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, and then Jesus crying out in his last breath and giving up his spirit, the Turk exploded. “What did the Christians’ God do then?” he demanded. “Did he send his thousands of legions from heaven to smite and destroy those who had so treated his son?” Marco Polo’s answer clearly disappointed the warrior Khan, who remained unconverted to Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

To those in power, the way of Jesus does not fit into conventional wisdom. The ways of the Kingdom of God are not conventional ways.

Jesus is arrested in the night and brought to trial. First before the high priest Caiaphas and his council, then by Pilate who pawns him off on Herod, and finally back to Pilate where he

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<sup>1</sup> This story comes from Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon, “Blood Kin” in her book of sermons *Mixed Blessings*.

convicted of insurrection. In most cases this would mean insighting violent revolution and rebellion. They accuse Jesus on three counts, all political in nature: he has been perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king. In one sense, Jesus is innocent of these crimes, for he did not favor taking up arms/violence against the Roman government. Nor did he urge his followers to not pay their taxes. And yet, in another sense, he was guilty. In that he never gave his ultimate allegiance to Rome or to any other kingdom of this world – he was calling for a revolution of a kind, not one with swords or military strategy, but a non-violent transformation life, religion, and how we organize ourselves as a society.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' ways and teachings did not fall in-line with the conventional thinking of the Romans or of the Religious elite and powerful of his day.

It is easy to think of those who conspired to kill Jesus as especially evil – the collaboration on the part of a small circle of Jewish leaders centered around the high priest Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate, the Governor of region – in light of all who Jesus was and is, of Jesus' goodness and mercy and love, well, it only comes to reason that those who would want him dead and actively seek to kill him, they must be people of great evil, perhaps even possessed of the devil to do all that they did.

But, they probably were not evil, they were simply the established order of their society, standing at the top of their social world politically, economically and religiously<sup>3</sup>. Their place in society gave them the responsibility for maintaining order – they were people who were invested

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<sup>2</sup> Brendan Byrne in *The Hospitality of God: A reading of Luke's Gospel*

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg makes this point in his book *Jesus A New Vision*.

in things running the way they were. For these elite, the world was working for them, they were at the top of society in terms of financial and political power, and so, of course this meant they had a vested interest in things remaining as they were. They had a vested interest in maintaining order. Of staying at the top. They had a vested interest in not questioning the conventional wisdom of their day. They had a vested interest in keeping their eyes closed to the state of life for those on the margins – for those whom the current order of things was not working.

In the early 1900s, **Ida B. Wells** was a 30-year-old newspaper editor living in Memphis when three black business men in her city were lynched.<sup>4</sup> And so, at great risk to her own livelihood and life, she began to investigate the systematic lynchings of black men taking place all over the south, crisscrossing the South over several months, conducting eyewitness interviews and digging-up records on dozens of similar cases.

The conventional wisdom of the time that was used to justify lynchings was that, 1) God had created whites superior, and 2) black men were rapists. What her reporting found was that in two-thirds of these mob murders, rape was never even an accusation. And when it was, the evidence showed that it had usually been a consensual interracial relationship. Wells began to show to the world that lynching was a violent form of subjugation — “an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and ‘the black-man down,’ ” she wrote in a journal.

And so Ida B. Wells began to expose to the nation and the world how those in religious and political power were working together to keep things as they were – to maintain their power and wealth and privilege as White Americans.

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<sup>4</sup> I first came to learn of the work of Ida B. Wells through the preaching of the Rev. Otis Moss III

After her anti-lynching editorials were published, she was run out of the South — her newspaper ransacked and destroyed, her life threatened. But her commitment to chronicling the experience of Black-Americans in order to assert their full humanity remained unflinching. While her name has largely been lost to the history, she was a key leader in what eventually became known as the Civil Rights Movement. Her work that began to reveal the bankruptcy of the conventional wisdom of her day – her work to expose the systems that are at work to maintain things as they are – her work to open the eyes of a nation to how contrary conventional wisdom was to the ways of the kingdom of God.

The High Priest was appointed by Rome and accountable to the Roman governor – he was responsible for maintaining order in Palestine; in fact, the High Priest’s position depended upon success at the task of keeping law and order. If there was word of potential uprising, word of people organizing themselves for change, if there was chaos happening in Palestine – you can bet that the standing Governor would remove the High Priest and appoint a new one, one who could maintain law and order. And Caiaphas, the high priest at the time of Jesus, must have been quite good at his job and working with the Romans, because he held his position for an unusually long period of eighteen years, including the full ten years of Pilate’s reign.<sup>5</sup>

Caiaphas would have been worried about news of this charismatic leader who attracted a growing following. As the council of the High Priest talked together, and they feared that a Jesus movement might cause unrest and eventually a Roman intervention, Caiaphas said, “It is better

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus A New Vision*.

that one man die rather than the whole nation perish.”<sup>6</sup> From their point of view, the preservation of their social order was worth the death of a misguided teacher.

It was not that these Jewish officials were bad people, it is just that they were doing the best to work for how they saw things from their place at the top. They were not evil, but they had a vested interest to maintain the conventional ways of life – to keep things ordered as they were – to keep themselves in power. We might say, as Marcus Borg does, that it was the conventional wisdom of the time – the dominant consciousness of the day – that was responsible for the death of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> The high priest and his circle were both the servants and guardians of the dominant consciousness – servants to keeping things as they were – servants of keeping themselves in their positions of power. Servants of law and order.

But of course, in sentencing to death one who lived a life of love – one who taught “love your neighbor as yourself” – in executing one who was a healer – in being afraid of one who taught ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ – in beating and nailing to a cross one who sought to restore people to their community and the fullness of their humanity. In doing this, these powerful – these elite – they reveal the bankruptcy of the conventional wisdom; they reveal that their vested interest is not the common good, it is certainly not the Kingdom of God – it is maintaining things as they are – a way of life which works for them.

Thus the alternative consciousness of Jesus, what he called ‘the Kingdom of God’, collided with the dominant consciousness of his culture. The powerful have no interest in the

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<sup>6</sup> John 11:50

<sup>7</sup> Again from Borg’s book, *Jesus A New Vision*.

lowly lifted up and being brought down from their thrones; the rich do not particularly want to be sent away empty; those who put people into slavery and prison don't especially want to see the captives go free. And so if there is someone who is proclaiming these things and growing in popularity – conventional wisdom says that this person must be dealt with.

But for a system to change, for transformation to happen, we must first see that the conventional wisdom is bankrupt – we must first see the places where the conventional wisdom is working to keep things as they are: to help the wealthy acquire more wealth, to keep the powerful in power, to keep those of us with prestige, prestigious.

We must first have our eyes opened to some of the ways that people are being exploited, killed, beaten-down, and used up by the conventional wisdom. We must first have our eyes opened to the realities of how so much of the conventional wisdom is the antithesis to the kingdom of God. Redemption, transformation, salvation – they can only begin when we see the reality of our present situation; they start with allowing ourselves to see where the conventional wisdom is not the wisdom of the God we meet in Jesus Christ.

And so in our world who is exposing the bankruptcy of conventional wisdom? Working to open our eyes to the systems of domination trying to keep things in place?

In these weeks since the shooting that left seventeen high school students of Parkland, Florida dead, we have experienced what feels like a new awakening to gun violence in our country – an awakening that is being lead by students. Students who are saying to us – to adults

and to government officials – we do not feel safe in our schools, you need to do something about this, we must change how things are, enough is enough. And sadly, we cannot say any longer to these students, “oh don’t worry about it, you are safe at school – you will be fine.” We clearly cannot say with any semblance of truth. And so, without being able to say that, if we say that we are unwilling to act, to make a change, to take action – then we are saying to these students, “I have a vested interest in keeping things the way they are. I have a vested interest in there not being any change related to gun-policy or school safety.” The conventional wisdom of our time: of gun laws, of glorifying violence, of letting our children train themselves to kill by playing video games, of funding war over education and mental health – this conventional wisdom has lead us to where we are. And students are beginning to expose the brokenness of the way things are – they are opening us to see that we must undergo a transformation.

And something that I have been silent about that a few brave women are unmasking for us – is the enormity of the number of women in our country who are victims of sexual violence. The #Metoo movement has begun to pry open the eyes of our male-dominated society to show us how many of our sisters and daughters and mothers and friends have been victims of men believing they can do as they wish – of men acting in ways that seek to maintain their place of power and prestige in our world. And when in response to this movement, us men say, “this has gone too far, we don’t even know what we can say to a woman anymore without it being seen as sexual harassment.” What we are actually saying is that “we have a vested interest in women staying silent and having things remain as they are.” As women of all walks of life force us to

acknowledge the bankruptcy of our conventional wisdom, we see how far we still have to go until there is “no longer male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>8</sup>

Religion too often upholds the way things are, as those who get to the top of a religious community – we too have vested interest in keeping things as they are. For men to not give up their pulpits and salaries and power to women; to not push too hard against a government that gives us a protected tax status and lets us discriminate however we wish in the name of our religion. And so we have often said, let us not worry about changing this life too much, but instead let us mostly worry about our internal and eternal life, concern yourself only with your family and your own salvation. Let us pray that things might change, but let us not take too much action on those prayers. Let us give mercy to those in need: give a sandwich to those in need, but don't ever ask ‘why are they hungry?’ Give a coat to someone without a home, but don't ever ask, ‘why does this person not have a home when some have 4 and 5 homes?’ Open a free clinic once or twice a week, but don't ever ask, ‘why are some people who work full time unable to afford health care?’ Let us maintain things as they are.

But, my friends, Jesus did not come to leave things as they were, he came to transform all of life: heart, soul, families, society, and how our whole world is ordered. As his mother said at his conception, “he was here to lift up the lowly and bring down the powerful from their thrones.”<sup>9</sup>A life grounded in the Spirit of God, in the ways of the God we meet in Jesus Christ –

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<sup>8</sup> Galations 3:28

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:52 (part of Mary's Song, or the *Magnificat*)

this is a life that will almost always make us feel like we are bumping up against the conventional wisdom of our time. A life that is seeking to be in-line with the kingdom of God, it will make us often feel like we are crazy because so much of how we see the world is different from how most in our society sees the world.

As we seek to be those following the ‘way of Jesus’, we will certainly not be popular with those whose vested interest is in maintaining the status quo – of those are lead by the conventional wisdom of our day. This does not mean that they are evil, it simply means that from where they stand at the top, the system is working pretty well.

But Jesus did not stand with those at the top. He loved from the bottom. And for that, he was found guilty: guilty of not pledging allegiance to Rome. Guilty for not saying that religion should help keep things as they are. Guilty for leading a revolution of love.

May we too be found guilty.

May we too be found guilty.