

*Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. <sup>46</sup> But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup> Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.*

*“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”*

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

*<sup>51</sup> He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, <sup>52</sup> and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they plotted to take his life. (John 11:45-53)*

### **It is Better that One Man Die for the People!**

During the Vietnam War, an army press officer is supposed to have said, “We had to destroy the village to save it.” There’s some controversy about whether or not he actually said that. But if he did, do you think he was trying to contradict himself? More likely, in the heat of questioning, he failed to see the irony of his statement. This year, during Lent, we’re talking about irony – about situations that are different from what you would expect. Tonight, I want to focus on unintentional irony. Sometimes, we do and say things that are ironic without even realizing it. Tonight, we have just such a situation before us. Caiaphas, the high priest, makes one of the clearest statements of gospel you’ll ever find – and he never even realized it. His words are tonight’s irony of the passion: **It is better that one man die for the people!**

#### **I.**

Caiaphas said this several weeks before Jesus’ last trip to Jerusalem. Ordinarily during Lent we focus on events that took place during the week before Jesus died. But this incident lays the foundation of so much that was going to happen that it’s worth our attention tonight. The death of Christ was more than just a tragedy. Its significance goes far beyond the all too common realities of injustice and human cruelty. Caiaphas helps us to see what God had in mind. But he was making a very different point. **It is better that one man die for the people! This shows the guilt of Jesus’ enemies.**

John tells us that many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary put their faith in Jesus because they saw what he did. Do you know what Jesus had just done? He had raised Lazarus from the dead. It was one of those things you wish you could’ve seen. Jesus tells them to roll the stone away over and then he shouts, “Lazarus, come out!” A man four days dead stumbles out of the tomb, alive. Many people saw that Jesus has the power to free us from death and they believed in him. There’s no irony in that.

Yet John says, **“But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.”** You’d think they would’ve been moved by seeing the dead live. But all they could do was tattle. Then the Pharisees called an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The council was divided between Pharisees and Sadducees and they usually disagreed about everything. But now they spoke with one voice: **“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’”**

Jesus’ enemies recognized that he was doing miracles. They didn’t deny that Lazarus had been dead and now he was alive. They understood that Jesus had raised him for the purpose of creating faith. What was their response? “Everybody’s going to believe in him!” They were terrified that Jesus was going to convert the whole nation of Israel to his gospel! They thought that would be a tragedy. It would spell the end of their understanding of the law and of Israel’s unique place in history. They couldn’t imagine that their country would continue in those circumstances. But more than that, they feared for themselves. From the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, these religious leaders had understood that Jesus was a threat to their authority. They claimed the right to interpret the Scriptures. But Jesus was constantly telling them they were wrong, that

their hearts were hard, that their religion of works was false. If they had lost their hold on the people, the Romans would get rid of them.

But Caiaphas had a solution to their problem. He said, **“You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”** That statement ended the discussion. From this time forward, they plotted to take Jesus’ life. It was the only solution that made sense. Of course, it wasn’t the only solution that made sense. The world is full of people who disagree with us and many of them have much more influence on public opinion and even morals than we do. But we don’t plot to kill them. If Jesus really were a false teacher, these men could have simply entrusted themselves to God and opposed his false teaching with the truth. But these teachers of Israel had to kill him.

Why did they reach that conclusion? It wasn’t politics. It was hatred. In the next chapter, they even plotted to kill Lazarus again. That’s how much they hated Jesus and his message. Where did that hatred come from? Unbelief. The Bible tells us that the sinful mind is God’s enemy – and all unbelievers have sinful minds. Jesus himself tells us that the world will hate us because it hated him. This is simply the most concrete example of that truth. So in the face of Jesus’ greatest miracle, his enemies determined to kill him.

That’s pretty ironic. But it may not seem like it has a great deal to do with us. After all, we don’t hate Jesus. We believe the Son of God became man to take our sin away. That’s why we’re here tonight. For all that, I thank God. But each of us has the seed of unbelief in our hearts. Each of us has the pride of the Pharisees inside us, just waiting for an opportunity to spring up and crowd God out of our hearts and out of our lives. Even though we are church going people, we aren’t immune. The Pharisees were the church going people of their day. They studied their Bibles regularly. They even taught in the synagogues.

But behind the appearance of faith lay hearts that were dead and cold. What killed those hearts? Sinful human pride. Pride kills faith. Faith says, “I need God to do everything for me.” Pride says, “I can do it all myself.” If we constantly tell ourselves how good we are, how dedicated we are, how lucky our church is to have us, then, my friends, we’re on the road to becoming Pharisees. If pride takes control of our hearts, hatred of the gospel will take control, too, although it will probably hide itself behind the image of concern for our church or our traditions or our children.

Are we guilty of pride? Well, pinch yourself. Did it hurt? Do you have flesh and blood? Then you are guilty of pride because pride lives in the heart of every sinner. That sinful pride should carry us all down to hell. But pride is not the point John was making. Rather, the pride of these men became the means to an end: Jesus had to die in Jerusalem. That’s why he came. God had determined to take the hate and unbelief of these men and turn it into gospel, into blessing for all people. Because Jesus let these men kill him, our sin is paid for – even the seeds of pride that lurk in our hearts – and we are forgiven. Because the Holy Spirit comes to us when we hear that good news, God wages war against the pride in our hearts, day by day.

## II.

Caiaphas proclaimed that very gospel of God even though all he intended to communicate was hatred and self-serving pragmatism. Caiaphas was not in control that day. God was. God really made this statement to us: **It is better that one man die for the people. This shows the love of God.**

John says, **“He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation.”** 1500 years earlier, God told Moses to make his brother, Aaron, the first high priest. God gave Aaron the Urim and the Thummim. What those were, exactly, the Bible never tells. But it does say what they were for: to “inquire” of the Lord. In some special way, God revealed his will to the high priest through those instruments. By Jesus’ day, they were lost. But the high priest still went into the temple once a year and made intercession before God. St. Paul calls preaching the gospel a “priestly duty.” God always intended his Old Testament priests to speak for him to his people. Just as he had done when the high priests were faithful, God made this high priest speak for him one last time.

But Caiaphas was unaware of what the Holy Spirit was doing. That was ironic because God had given the priesthood to point to Jesus. The high priest was like an actor who performed a play for the people. For 1500 years he brought blood sacrifices to God to show that Jesus would come and sacrifice himself to pay for our sins. One last time, God spoke through the high priest to close out the Old Covenant and bring an end to symbols and sacrifices and to replace them with reality. After this prophecy was fulfilled, the priesthood ended. There was no more need for sacrifices. The office of prophet, the office of proclaiming what our High Priest has done, passed from the physical nation of Israel to the Christian Church.

Caiaphas preached a sermon that told why Jesus had to die. It was better in God's sight that one man die so that the whole people would not perish. That sinful pride in our hearts is a universal human condition. All sinners have it. It condemns all of us to die and go to hell. But God did not want that to happen. So he sent his Son to die and pay for our pride. Jesus came as the true High Priest that Israel was waiting for and offered the only blood that could ever pay for our sins, the only blood that could ever turn God's anger away from us, the only blood that could ever makes us friends with God again: his own blood. The blood of God made man.

Jesus' blood – the blood of God – is worth more than the universe. So it paid for so much more than the nation of Israel. John says, **“and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.”** God always planned to save us Gentiles. Caiaphas prophesied that Jesus would die for the whole nation, the whole Christian Church, indeed, for every man, woman and child who would ever live.

Do your sins ever bother you? In Jesus, we find peace. In Jesus, God wiped out the hell that should happen to us. He replaced it with the eternal life Jesus won. In Jesus' blood, God declared us strangers and Gentiles to be his true people. We, who are scattered thousands of miles and twenty centuries from Jerusalem and Caiaphas, are now bought and paid for children of God.

Now, God has made us one. You see, the way God looks at it, there is only one Christian Church. We don't see it that way. We see Lutherans and Methodists and Catholics. We see division and discord. We see people who don't seem too serious about their Christian lives. We can't see into the heart, so God expects us to join with people who say and do what God's Word tells us. But God himself does look at the heart. Wherever he sees faith in Jesus, he sees a member of his one Church. In heaven, we will all be one. Nothing that separates us now will divide us from other Christians. We will enjoy God's love together forever.

All that is ours because one man died for the people. God loved his Son above all of us. But he sacrificed him to bring us to heaven. All those who trust what Jesus has done will live forever. As far as we know, Caiaphas never understood what he said that day. So when he died, he went to hell in one last, sad bit of irony. But God has revealed to us the truth Caiaphas spoke. That truth means that we have eternal life. The great irony of the passion is God's unending, undeniable love. He declared that love even with the mouth of an unbeliever. Amen