

Passion Sunday
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Much energy has been expended over the years in trying to determine who is responsible for Jesus' death. You and I have a bog stake in that search. Just as in the old 1960's TV show *The Fugitive*, if we can find out who to blame, then the heat will be off of us.

The cast of possible villains is big. There is Judas of course, the high priest, Pilate, the religious leaders. But then the gospel writers have a way of extending and blurring the culpable in every wider circles: Peter, the disciples themselves, and in the end 'all the crowds.' In the end it seems everyone shares some responsibility.¹

This passion shall not long cooperate in our hope of finding an easy enemy of Jesus to blame for this death.

Everyone knows that, "Jesus died for us." And if he died "for us" it is possible that he died "from us" as well.

I know you were not in Gethsemane. And I know you were not at the trial. And I know you were not among the shouting crowds. But I believe you and I have been as resistant to his forgiveness as any of these resisters. And forgiveness is the offense for which he has come. Forgiveness is the blasphemy with which he is charged. This passion is our best evidence that God has determined to forgive. And that is where the trouble starts. The trouble is that you and I would not have it.

When Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic who had been let down through the roof, all the people were incensed. "This man is blaspheming," they said! And so it went throughout Jesus' ministry. The resistance to a forgiving God, now arrived in Jesus, is called sin. It is the deliverance no one wants. Jesus was persistent and consistent in proclaiming the forgiveness of sins to people that didn't deserve it, and sometimes didn't even ask for it. For being determined to forgive all the "crowds" were against him.

¹ "A careful examination of these ostensibly diverse groups, however, reveals an apparent randomness of the author's choice of terminology and the interchangeability of the charges against the groups. . . . We also see, however that like an impressionistic painting, the image lacks clean and clearly defined lines. The *blurring* of the opponent is Matthew's first act of construction." Judy Yates Siker, "Unmasking the Enemy: Deconstructing the 'Other' in the Gospel of Matthew," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 2005, p. 116.

One cannot run this world on forgiveness. There isn't enough of "us" in forgiveness. In this passion Jesus throws himself in our careening way, and we run him down. Rather than enduring this free gift of God, we crucify Jesus for it. He died so he could forgive.

We need no theories about Judas or the Jews. We need no villain with which to deform this story into something about "those" people. We need no elaborate doctrinal theories about Jesus "paying off" God with this death.

The fact is that we killed him. We wouldn't let him forgive. We – all of us, that is – yielded to the temptation to regulate our relationship with God according to the law. If you want to live that way, I suppose God will oblige. But it is a terrible way to live.²

A woman was once pestering her priest with weekly reports of her visions of Jesus.³ Each week Jesus would present himself to her, and told her to confess all of her sins. Every week she would present herself to the priest with a great stack of pious remorse. Week after week this persisted. In her obsession to justify herself before Christ, this woman could not really receive the gift of forgiveness.⁴ The priest planned an interruption in this pattern. One day the priest told her that when Jesus appeared to her this week she was to ask Jesus what sins he had forgiven her last week.

The next week the woman returned to her priest. "Well," the priest asked, "Did you see Jesus this week?"

"Yes, I did," the woman began.

"And did you ask him what were the sins for which he had forgiven her last week?"

"I did," the woman continued.

"And what did Jesus say?", the priest continued.

"I don't know," Jesus said, "I can't remember."

² The last five paragraphs borrow language and argument from Gerhard O. Forde, "Jesus Died For You," *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p 220-2.

³ I read this story very recently, but cannot remember the source.

⁴ "For sin is nothing other than the compulsion toward oneself into which man [sic] places himself. . . . The characteristic thing about Jesus, however, is that a *forgives* sin with God's authority and thus breaks the human compulsion toward itself. He battles against sin by being merciful to the sinner." Eberhard Jüngel, *God As the Mystery of the World*, trans. by Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 359.

It is this interruption of forgiveness toward which this week of passion leads. The passion is God's address to you that a whole new possibility for life opens up.⁵ It is a life lived not in justice, but in forgiveness. It is a life lived not so much in recommending our virtue as it is a life lived under grace.⁶ We never would have dreamed it up ourselves. In fact we resist it. Actually, you and I have mightily resisted it. In this passion God successfully interrupts our entire plan for life, and earns the right to forgive.⁷

Now then, step aside. Christ as a passion to live, and a cross on which to die. . . and a forgiveness to give you.

Amen.

⁵ Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. by Jeffrey F. Cayzer (London: T and T Clark, 2006), pp. 68-9.

⁶ "Christianity is not the move from vice to virtue, but rather the move from virtue to grace." The quotation is attributed to Gerhard O. Forde, but I have not been able to trace it down.

⁷ "This occurs by God's righteousness fundamentally interrupting the real life context of the world by the cross of Jesus, and by its continuing to interrupt it over and over by 'the message about the cross.' The interruption is at so fundamental a level that the ungodliness of the world is condemned to and caused to die. . . . We have not understood our justification until we see it as a fundamental interruption of our own life context and see Jesus Christ as being this fundamental interruption." Jüngel, pp. 80-1.