

ZIONSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REV. JIM CAPPS- MARCH 18, 2012

"QUESTIONED"

JOHN 18:19-24

Last weekend, several people from the ZPC family took part in a Kairos Prison Ministry weekend at the Pendleton Correctional Institution. Kairos is like a Great Banquet taking place in a prison setting. It is an amazing time when God does very special things in the lives of some of the most troubled people in our culture. It often feels like we are having a front row seat in the Book of *The acts of the Apostles*.

While I have been a part of Kairos experiences here in Indiana, the last one I was a part of took place in the Maghaberry Prison just outside of Belfast, Northern Ireland. It was my second Kairos weekend at Maghaberry which is their maximum security facility. All the participants on our weekends were "lifers" having committed a crime which took the life of another. Our teams there were made up of an equal number of Catholic and Protestant clergy, which immediately amazed the men whom we came to serve.

It is a Kairos practice to call off the name of the participant, who as he comes in to the area where we are meeting, is met by a team member who will serve as his sponsor for the weekend. The sponsor simply takes his man to get coffee or tea which was more popular there and then has a general conversation, getting to know one another. Never are you to ask a participant why he is incarcerated or how long he will be there.

Well, my man didn't show-up and there was another team member who had two participants, so the leader of the weekend asked if I would take one of them. Of course, I did and my man and I had a delightful conversation. I found out about his family of origin. He told me that his father was Egyptian and his mother Irish. That explained his dark hair and complexion. His family had lived in Egypt until 3 months before he was born when his father was killed in an automobile accident. His mother then moved them back to Ireland where he was born.

Our conversation went so well, that I decided to go a little deeper and asked him if the "troubles" had impacted his family. Now the "troubles" is the name given to the years of conflict there in Northern Ireland. My new friend, looked shocked and rolled his eyes before asking "You don't know who I am do you?"

After I told him I didn't know who he was, he told me if I looked his name on Google, I would find several pages about him. Furthermore, a Belfast paper would have a 7-page expose about him in the Sunday edition. He was the leader of one of the most violent paramilitary groups in the country.

After that session was finished and the team had a meal and debriefing, I shared my experience with them and they roared in laughter. Every one of them and virtually everyone in Northern Ireland knew the name of the man for whom I was serving as a sponsor. The newspaper expose that next week spoke of him being in charge of a kind of syndicate of crime, much like a mafia don. It was an experience I will never forget.

Much like the man I met on that Kairos weekend at Maghaberry in Northern Ireland, one of the main character's in the passage I am going to read from John 18, was the leader of a kind of organized crime taking place in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. The scene we will be trying to picture in our minds is like one you might see in a police drama. An interrogation is taking place and they hope to get a confession or gain further evidence enough to lead to an indictment against Jesus.

As we continue to "Countdown to the Cross" in John 18, today we see Jesus being questioned. Please follow along with me as I read John 18:19-24.

IN AN AMAZING JUXTAPOSITION OR TURN ABOUT OF JUSTICE, ANNAS, ONE OF THE WORST CRIMINALS OF JESUS' DAY IS REPRESENTING THE LAW AND QUESTIONING JESUS.

To begin to get an idea of what Annas was like, listen to these words from 19th Century scholar, Alfred Edersheim:

"No figure is better known in contemporary Jewish history than that of Annas; no person deemed more fortunate or successful, but none also more generally loathed and detested than the late high priest."

Annas was the high priest of Israel from AD 6-15. 4 of Annas' sons were also high priests of Israel. At the time of Jesus' questioning, Caiaphas, Annas' son-in-law was the high priest. Before the Romans ruled Israel, a person would be high priest for life. However the Romans were concerned about one person have power for too long. Furthermore, the high priest under the Romans went to the highest bidder. Without question, the office became a matter of contention, intrigue, bribery and corruption.

One of the reasons the high priest had so much power had to do with the reality that he was then chief-collaborator with the Romans. Not only did a high priest live in comfort and ease, experience prestige and power all of which came from the bribes, but he had the opportunity for close-cooperation with the ruling power.

The family of Annas was immensely wealthy so that they could buy their way into office year after year. Always, Annas like a mob family don, was the power behind it all. I can almost hear the theme from the movie *The Godfather* playing in the background.

As I mentioned last week, Annas' family wealth came from innocent people who travelled to the Temple to make a sacrifice. They were told that their offering did not meet the proper standards, but they could buy another right there, conveniently located in the Temple. These new offerings, costing as much as 4 times the regular price, could be purchased at the shops called the "Bazaars of Annas."

Maybe the closest thing we have to that kind of arrangement takes place at an event like the Super Bowl where the tickets are high and then the price food and drink inside is also highly elevated. The thing that is radically different is that this is done in the name of organized religion.

It was this blatant "ripping off" of the people that incited Jesus' anger and caused Him to overthrow the tables and chase the money changers out of the Temple. He was trying to shut-down Annas' racket. Annas could not let Him get away with it. He had to be snuffed out.

With this said, can you imagine the scene presented in the passage I read a few moments ago. Here we see the Son of God, the Righteous One, God's Anointed Messiah being interrogated by one of the very worst scoundrels of Jewish history. As we scratch our heads in utter amazement, it's plain to see that the law is not an issue. This is an outright mockery of justice.

To explain what I am talking about, an alleged criminal or perpetrator could not be asked a question which would incriminate him. Witnesses had to be brought in to make the case against such an individual.

To go a step further, Maimonides, a great Jewish Medieval scholar wrote, "Our true law does not inflict the death penalty upon a sinner by His own confession." No question about it, Annas questioning Jesus is a gross lack of justice. It just wasn't fair.

How about you? Have you ever felt that life is not fair? That you are not getting justice? That the magnitude of corruption or injustice is so large that you feel helpless to do anything about it?

Friends, if you are asking those questions, Jesus understands your questioning, your frustrations, your utter dismay. He knows because He allowed Himself to be questioned by Annas.

ANNAS IS WILLING TO DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO GAIN EVIDENCE AGAINST JESUS.

Verse 19 tells us that Annas' illegal questioning of Jesus began with two specific issues. The first had to do with all of the people who were following Him, specifically the ones who had been in the inner circle over the past three years. This was a crucial issue because of Jesus' enormous popularity. His popularity not only threatened the well-oiled machine of corruption which Annas' headed, but also the whole religious institution. If Jesus was not somehow stopped, everything could come tumbling down.

On the Sunday before, when Jesus had entered Jerusalem with great fanfare and the sound of "Hosannas," in John 12:19, the Pharisees were saying to one another, "See this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him." There is a sense of despair.

Annas has probably had his legal team search the Law to see what they could find to indict Jesus. In asking about Jesus' disciples it's possible that Annas is trying to gain information which will allow him to declare them as false prophets using a passage like Deuteronomy 13:1-10 as the basis for his indictment. He's probably hoping to invoke the death penalty because they have done signs and wonders which have led people astray.

The second part of Annas' questioning had to do with Jesus' teaching. Annas is hoping to lead Him into making claims to be divine; the Son of God; that God is His father. If he can somehow pull that out of Jesus, then he will charge that Jesus has committed blasphemy in the very worst way and must receive the punishment of death.

Please remember that Annas is breaking the Jewish Law by asking for Jesus' testimony against Himself. He is clearly desperate and willing to do whatever it takes to bring Jesus down.

When we understand what Annas was doing, Jesus' response to Him makes more sense.

JESUS TELLS ANNAS THAT HIS MINISTRY HAS BEEN DONE IN PUBLIC, MEANING THAT THERE ARE MANY WITNESSES.

Jesus knows that Annas should not be questioning Him in such a way that He will incriminate Himself. He makes it very clear that His whole ministry has been out in the open. In fact, much of his teaching has taken place in synagogues or the Temple. It's where good Jews go for learning and worship. Nothing has been spoken in secret. Everything has been in the open and is public record. Certainly, it would not be difficult to find two witnesses.

Then Jesus boldly asks Annas a question which in fact incriminates him, "Why do you ask me?" In essence, Jesus is saying, "Don't you realize it's not legal for you to ask me questions like that?" You should ask those who heard me. There is no question that they know what I taught.

Annas must have been enraged by Jesus' bold and forthright question. Not many people had ever had the courage to talk to him in this manner. One of Annas' henchman, possibly on cue, took Jesus words as being completely disrespectful and slapped Jesus, exclaiming, "Is this the way you answer the high priest?"

As a kind of non-anxious presence in the midst of a building chaos, Jesus said, "If I said something wrong testify to what is wrong." Let's stick to the subject. Prove me wrong.

Yet, Jesus goes on to say, "But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?"

While we aren't told exactly what happened, I imagine Annas is so angry that that he doesn't trust himself. If he loses his control and does something to Jesus, there could be a riot and he and his family could lose everything. So he sends Jesus to the current high priest, his son-in-law, Caiaphas. Even though he didn't gain anything further to use as evidence against Jesus, make no mistake about it, he is resolved to have Jesus executed.

Personal revenge has also reared its ugly head. No one speaks to Annas in the tone of voice Jesus had used. One way or another, Jesus must die.

As you think about that early morning interchange with Annas, the power broker, and all of the anxiety, have you been in similar situations? Maybe people were distraught and difficult words were spoken, words which couldn't be taken back once they were spoken. Those kind scenes are so disarming and leave us feeling powerless.

Dear friends, this same Jesus who knows what it is like to be in really tense situations, in this case, with His life on the line. He can help you be a less anxious presence and keep your cool. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, He can help you be a peacemaker, bringing reconciliation even in the most difficult situations. Your constructive actions and soothing words, boldly spoken, can be a gift to everyone involved.

I must say, that I haven't always been very good at dealing with conflict and have gotten hooked. Sometimes it's because I am caught off guard, and other times, it's because I feel passionately about the issue at hand. Whenever, I have allowed my agenda to be most important, I have caused dissension and "dis-ease."

Afterwards, I always feel crumby, knowing that I have missed an opportunity to be like Jesus. I come to the realization that I blend right into our world of entitlement and privilege when I become anxious because things aren't going my way.

However, there have been times when I have stood back in grateful awe when I have seen Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit work through me or others. When that happens, we become catalysts for peace. Rather than feeling crumby about myself, I feel very small and humble, when I am privileged to let Jesus, the Prince of Peace, shine through me. It's the same Jesus who was questioned before Annas' in an unbelievable juxtaposition of justice.

APPLICATION

Dear friends, we are living in a world where there is so much that seems unfair and unjust. Far too often it seems as if things are out of our control and we can feel a deep sense of anxiety.

Think of all those people south of us who are still suffering mightily after the devastating tornado more than 2 weeks ago. Humanly speaking, it's tough to make sense of a whole family of 5 dying, so many people injured, many of whom are also homeless, losing all their worldly possessions. I remember in the flood of 1993 in St. Louis seeing people lose possessions like pictures, doll sets, momentoes, and various other items which could never be replaced. How do you put a price tag on something your child made for you or wedding pictures?

While things are beginning to look up, the lingering effects of the deepest recession since the Great Depression still are taking their toll and people are fighting for survival as they look for employment. In this election year, we are all too aware of the partisan stalemate which makes us question the sincerity of our political leaders.

When it comes to morality and ethics, it feels like the landscape has and is changing in our country. It seems like the Bible which long has been our standard for determining the morality of an issue or act is not the basis for making decisions. Instead, it's become more of a history book telling us where the Judeo-Christian ethic came from, but not the primary authority for living our lives.

Let me share a case in point. A little over a year ago I received an e-mail about a book for children entitled, *Conversations with God*, which was at the time was being distributed to schools and children by the Scholastic Book Club. Listen to two questions and answers found in this book:

Question to God- "I am living with my boy friend. My parents say that I should marry him because I am living in sin. Should I marry him?"

Answer from God: "Who are you sinning against? Not me because you have done nothing wrong."

A question comes to God about God's forgiveness.

Answer from God- "I do not forgive anyone because there is nothing to forgive....There is no such thing as right and wrong"

Probably each one of us can fill in some blanks in all kinds of situations in our lives which cause us to be anxious and feel helpless to change things.

Dear friends, as we continue to "Countdown to the Cross" and continue to unpack the character and nature of Jesus, please know that this same Jesus understands and cares about you, your situation, your frustration, your anxiety, and your sense of hopelessness. You matter to Jesus. He proves that you matter by loving you even when you turned your back on Him. He wants to bring you forgiveness for your past, peace, joy and meaning in the present, and hope for the future.

But more than that, Jesus wants to make you a herald of hope, a catalyst for transformation and justice, and a maker of peace and reconciliation in the world in which often seems unfair and impossible. Be very certain, Jesus, who stood up to the ruthless Annas, can help you, through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, to be an agent of change and reformation.

In John 14:12, we are promised that through the power of the Spirit, we will be able to do not only the things Jesus did while he was here on this earth, but also "greater things than these." Are you willing to ask God to use you to make a difference in some of those areas that seem impossible?

In the same vain, as a church, I believe that rather than sitting back bemoaning the fact that life around us is changing at an alarming rate in some unfathomable ways, we need to say, "God help us be the answer to our prayers and the prayers of others. Use us to be your people doing your work in our world. Help us believe when you are empowering us, nothing is impossible."

If you would like someone to pray with you afterwards, there will be members of our prayer team ready to pray with you after the service in the area by the cross. May God bless you and make you a blessing.