During the Vietnam War, an army officer is supposed to have said: **We had to destroy the village to save it.** There is 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, he failed to see the irony of his statement.

This year during Lent, we are talking about irony - situations that are different from what you would expect. Sometimes we do and say things that are ironic without even realizing it. Tonight, we focus on unintentional irony. Caiaphas, the high priest, makes one of the clearest gospel statements 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.**

Caiaphas said this several weeks before Jesus’ last trip to Jerusalem. During Lent we usually focus on events that took place during the week before Jesus died. Even though this occurred weeks before, it does lay the foundation for so much that was going to happen. The death of Christ was more than just a tragedy, far beyond the 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 believed in Jesus because they had just seen Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus told a man who had been dead four days to come out of his tomb - and he did - alive. Many people saw that Jesus had the power to free them from death and so they believed in him. There is no irony in that.

Yet John says: **Some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.** You would think that they would have been moved by seeing a dead man now alive, but all they could do was tattle. So the Pharisees called an emergency mtg of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The council was divided between Pharisees and Sadducees, who usually disagreed about everything. But now they spoke with one voice: **What are we accomplishing?** they asked. Here is this man performing many 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 temple and our nation.

Jesus’ enemies recognized that he was doing miracles. They could not deny that Lazarus had been dead and was now alive. What was their response? **Everybody is 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 could not imagine that their country would continue in those circumstances.

But more than that, they feared for themselves. From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, these religious leaders saw Jesus as 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.

However, 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.** From that time on, they plotted to take Jesus’ life. It was the only solution that made sense.

Of course, it was not the only solution that made sense. There are a lot of people who disagree with us, but we do not plot to kill them. If Jesus was really a false teacher, these men could have simply entrusted themselves to God and opposed his false teaching with the truth. But they felt they had to kill him.

It was not a political decision. It was hatred. In the next chapter we learn they even plotted to kill Lazarus. That is 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 a concrete example of that truth. So in the face of Jesus' greatest miracle, his enemies determined to kill him.

That is pretty ironic. But it may not seem like it has a great deal to do with us. After all, we do not hate Jesus. We believe the Son of God became man to take our sins away. That is why we are 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 lives. Even though we are church-going people, we are not 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. Sinful human pride killed those hearts. 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 we are on the road to becoming Pharisees. If pride takes control of our hearts, hatred of the gospel will ultimately take control too, although it will probably hide itself behind the image of concern for our church, our traditions, or our children.

Are we guilty of pride? Well, if you are alive and 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. John's point here is that the pride of these men became the means to an end - Jesus had to die in Jerusalem.

But that is why he came. God had determined to take the hate and unbelief of these men and turn it into a blessing for all people. Because Jesus let these men kill him, our sin is paid for. 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.

Caiaphas proclaimed that 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. 1,500 years earlier, God told Moses to make his brother Aaron the first high priest. God gave Aaron the Urim and the Thummim. The Bible does not tell us exactly what they were, 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 to people for him. Just as he had done when the high priests were faithful, God made this high priest speak for him one last time.

Caiaphas was unaware of what the Holy Spirit was doing. That was ironic because God had given the priesthood to point to Jesus. For 1,500 years the high priest brought blood sacrifices to God to show that Jesus would one day come and sacrifice himself to pay for our sins. God spoke one last time through the high priest to close out the Old Covenant and bring an end to symbols and sacrifices and to replace them with their fulfillment. After this prophecy was fulfilled, the Old Testament priesthood ended. There was no more need for sacrifices. The office of prophet - that 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. All sinners have sinful pride in their hearts. 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 make us friends with God again - his own blood, the blood of the God-man.

Jesus’ blood - the blood of God - is worth more than the whole universe. And it paid for more than just the nation of Israel, as 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 Christian church - 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 and replaced it with the eternal life Jesus won. In Jesus’ blood, God declared us - strangers and Gentiles - to be his true people. Through faith in Christ, we, who are scattered thousands of miles and 20 centuries from Jerusalem and Caiaphas, are now bought and paid for children of God.

Now God has made us one in Christ. You see, the way God looks at it, there is only one Christian church. We do not always see it that way. We see Lutherans and Methodists and Catholics. We see division and discord. But we cannot 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 willingly 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 through faith in Jesus we have eternal life. The great irony of the passion is God’s unending, undeniable love. He declared that love even through the mouth of an unbeliever. Amen.

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