"Injustice and the Trial of Jesus"
John 18:12-28a
February 7, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We come this morning to John 18:12-28.

There are two significant events that are intertwined here, and we will consider them over two sermons. This morning we will consider the trial of Jesus, and next Lord's Day we will consider the denials of Peter.

With that in mind, please do listen carefully, for this is God's word for us this morning.

18:12 So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and
bound him. 13 First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high
priest that year. 14 It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one
man should die for the people.
15 Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to
the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, 16 but Peter stood outside
at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the
servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. 17 The servant girl at the door said to
Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." 18 Now the
servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and
warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.
19 The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 Jesus answered
him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple,
where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. 21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who
have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said." 22 When he had said these things, one
of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "Is that how you answer the high
priest?" 23 Jesus answered him, "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what
I said is right, why do you strike me?" 24 Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.
25 Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You also are not
one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." 26 One of the servants of the high
priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden
with him?" 27 Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.
28 Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early
morning.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray …

Lord, as the psalmist does,
we ask you to work now through this, your word to your servants,
the very word in which you have helped us to place our hope.

For our comfort in the afflictions we face in this world
is that your promises in your word give us life.
Though the world may deride us,
we do not turn from this, your revelation to us.
Teach us from it now, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:49-51]

INTRODUCTION

This morning we will consider the trial of Jesus. And as we do, we will especially focus on the theme of injustice.

In order to do that, we're first going to analyze the procedure and steps followed in Jesus's trial, and then we will consider three things we should take away from that.

THE TRIAL OF JESUS

So, we begin with an analysis of Jesus's trial.

And to do that, we will actually need to combine John's text with a passage from Matthew.

As we have noted before, John often wrote to supplement rather than repeat what was recorded in the other gospels. And so, while other gospels give us the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas, the acting high priest, John gives us the first steps of the trial carried out before Annas, the patriarch of the high priestly family. John then skips over the continuation of the trial under Caiaphas. We see that since in verse twenty-four Annas sends Jesus to Caiaphas, and then, after being told about Peter's denials, we jump to Jesus being sent from Caiaphas to Pilate in verse twenty-eight.

And so, to fill in that gap, we will, as John would have expected us to, look to another gospel writer. By combining the events before Annas found in John with the events before Caiaphas found in Matthew, we get a fuller picture of the trial of Jesus before the Jewish authorities.

Hear then from Matthew twenty-six and twenty-seven. There we read:

57 Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and
the elders had gathered. […] 59 Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false
testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false
witnesses came forward. At last two came forward 61 and said, "This man said, 'I am able
to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" 62 And the high priest stood up and
said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" 63 But Jesus
remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you
are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now
on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of
heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further
witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. 66 What is your judgment?" They
answered, "He deserves death." 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped
him, 68 saying, "Prophesy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

And then, a few verses later:

27:1 When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.

So, as we consider the process of the Jewish trial of Jesus, first before Annas and then before Caiaphas, what do we see here?

Well, on the most obvious level we see one massive injustice: Jesus Christ, the Lord of life, the sinless one – in fact the only human being ever to live without sin – is sentenced to death by the court. This is, as Christians confess, the injustice of all injustices – the supreme unjust verdict of all history.

But if we are to understand these events, and if we are to understand how injustice so often works, we need to see that it's not just the *result* of the trial that is unjust, but the *process* as well.

After all, great injustices do not usually spring up from nowhere. They are usually the result of a whole number of smaller injustices that culminate in a great injustice. And that is the pattern we see here.

A few expositors have highlighted the combination of injustices in these events, though I'll be especially drawing on the work of John Maclaren.

Now, a disclaimer is in order. Maclaren and others base portions of their analysis on a comparison of the requirements for a trial found in the *Mishna* and what actually transpired at Jesus's trial. The difficulty in this is that there is scholarly debate about what time period different portions of the Mishna came from – whether before, during, or after Jesus's day.

While we can't have certainty that every relevant portion of the *Mishna* had the force of law in Jesus's day, I think we can say with some confidence that it's unlikely that all of the relevant passages were only later developments. Instead, I think we can say that it is quite likely that many of those requirements recorded in the *Mishna* would have been relevant in Jesus's day, expected practices of those carrying out the trial.

With that said, what are some of the injustices that we find?

First of all, we are told in Luke [22:52] that some of the chief priests participated in the arrest of Jesus, but then also took their place as judges over Jesus's trial. This would have been improper at the time, as it places the arresting party – the accusers – also in the role of the supposedly impartial judge and jury over the case.

Second, Anna's questioning of Jesus was irregular, and in bad faith. Such preliminary questioning was not normal in the Jewish court system and was not only a break from regular procedure, but an attempt to entrap Jesus. In fact, it's possible that Jesus's answer is intended to point that out – highlighting that the trial should begin with the questioning of witnesses, not with the questioning of the accused. By highlighting this, Jesus may be expressing his desire for a fair and just trial.

Which brings us to our third item: When Jesus speaks, possibly questioning the procedure, he is struck. We see that in verse twenty-two. Physically striking Jesus for answering a question and

possibly raising a point of order gives us a clear picture of the lack of interest the court has in impartial judgment.

Under Caiaphas a fourth injustice becomes clear: the trial is proceeding at night. Capital cases were not supposed to be held at night. The reason for such a procedural rule certainly makes sense. A trial deciding whether a man lives or dies should not be held in a rushed manner, or under the secrecy of night. But that is still what the leaders do.

As the trial then proceeds, we see a fifth injustice: the chief priests and the council are seeking false testimony. We see this in Matthew 16:59.

Then, when even the false witnesses could not agree on a serious enough charge, we come to a sixth injustice: Jesus is compelled to testify. Maclaren points out that Jesus's silence, recorded in Matthew 26:62-63 may reflect the fact that the prosecution has failed to give sufficient evidence. In response, Caiaphas invokes the name of God to call on Jesus to testify, even though a defendant was not supposed to be compelled to testify against himself.

Seventh, Caiaphas then seeks to base the verdict solely on Jesus's words. This might seem odd to us, but Maclaren argues that proceeding that way was not allowed. The judge of such a case was charged with the protection of the accused to such an extent that he was not supposed to allow the accused to be condemned in a capital case based solely on evidence the accused himself supplied. Caiaphas does the opposite of this.

Eighth, Caiaphas uses his influence as high priest to sway the outcome by declaring his verdict in Matthew 26:65 before the council actually voted.

Ninth, there are several issues with the timing of the vote. They hold a vote at night, which again, goes against the rules for a capital trial. But then along with that, they do not allow for a day to intervene between the trial and a guilty verdict – a provision for capital cases intended to cause those voting to reflect for a period before sentencing a man to death. A perfunctory second vote is held the next morning, but even this one is problematic, as it is held on a feast day – another action that was likely not legally proper.

Tenth, and finally, though it is beyond our text, there is a shift in the charge, which occurs when the Sanhedrin sends Jesus to Pilate. Jesus is condemned for blasphemy, but the Jewish leaders transform the charge by eventually implying to Pilate that Jesus is an insurrectionist.

[For the items listed above, see Maclaren 1669-1672; Boice; Keller, 186]

In the trial of Jesus we are given a concentrated picture of injustice. We see how what should have been an instrument of justice – the high court of the People of God – delivered instead the most unjust sentence in history: the condemnation of the sinless Son of God.

And so, as we consider these events, as we see the patterns that led to that great injustice, we should then turn and examine our own lives.

And we'll do that in three ways: We'll ask what this picture of injustice teaches us to see, what it teaches us to seek, and where it teaches us to find our hope.

WHAT WE NEED TO SEE

So, first, what should the trial of Jesus teach us to see?

And, perhaps this is obvious, but the trial of Jesus should teach us to see – to really see – injustice.

Because the truth is … we have a tendency not to see injustice around us … especially when it is happening to other people.

I recently read a book on perception and decision making by Annie Duke, and she discuses a psychological phenomenon that has been documented many times over, called "self-serving bias." This is an extremely prevalent tendency among people, and it goes like this: When things go well for us, we tend to attribute it to our own abilities. When things go well for others, we tend to attribute it to their luck – to circumstances outside of their control. And there are a number of reasons we do that, but one is because it makes us feel good about ourselves. When we succeed, it is because we are great. When other people succeed, well, they just got lucky.

But there's another side to this bias. Because study after study also shows that when things go badly for us, then we tend to attribute it to circumstances outside of our control. But when things go bad for others, we tend to blame them. [Duke, 89-96]

Now … that is not terribly charitable.

But it has another effect on us as well.

It means we tend to downplay injustice in the lives of others.

If our default thought-pattern is that when other people – especially people different from us – face problems in their lives, then it's probably their fault, then our tendency will be to deny the presence of injustice in the lives of others, when it may in fact be there.

So this morning, I want us to use the account of Jesus's trial to ask where we might be failing to see injustice around us that we should see.

So, for now, don't focus on injustice you see but others deny – focus on injustice others claim is there, but that *you* tend to deny.

But to do that, of course, we need to consider what justice is. Tim Keller, in his book *Generous Justice*, is helpful in this.

The Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*, is used more than two hundred times in the Old Testament. And as we consider it, we get a picture of what Biblical justice is.

One of the first things we see is that it means judging people who have done wrong with fairness. Leviticus 24:22 says "You shall have the same rule" – and the Hebrew word there translated "rule" is "*mishpat*," "justice" – "You shall have the same justice for the sojourner and for the native."

What does that mean? Well it tells us that justice "means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of [their] case, regardless of race or social status" or any other considerations. "Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty." [Keller, 3]

That is one aspect of biblical justice. But it's not all of it.

Because, second, Biblical justice also means giving people their rights – what is due to them. And so, when Deuteronomy 18 talks about the financial support of the priests, it describes the wages they receive for their labor as "the priests' *mishpat*" "which means their due or their right." It is what is due to them for their labors.

But of course, rights extend beyond that, as we read in Proverbs 31:9, where we are called to "defend the rights of the poor and needy." Because when the Bible speaks of the failure to protect and care for the most vulnerable, it doesn't describe it "merely as a lack of mercy or charity, but [as] a violation of justice, of *mishpat.*"

"God loves and defends" those who are most vulnerable, Keller writes, "and so should we. That is what it means to 'do justice.'" [Keller, 4-5]

Mishpat, then – biblical justice – is "giving people what they are due", whether it be punishment for wrong they have done, reward for the right they have done, or the protection and care that every human being owes every other human being who is made in the image of God. [Keller, 3-4. For more, see Keller, 1-18]

David Jones sums up the same concept when he says that justice "means that every human being should be treated according to what it means to be human" – as "one who bears the image of God and who has a divine calling to fulfill." [Jones, 83]

Injustice is when we fail to do that. It is when we respond to those who have done wrong by rewarding them, by punishing them too lightly, or by punishing them beyond what their actions deserve.

Injustice is when, instead of rewarding those who have done good, we punish them.

Injustice is when someone has the ability to protect the vulnerable, as they are called to protect all who bear God's image, but they choose not to.

Injustice is when someone has the ability to care for the vulnerable and marginalized, but again, they choose not to do it.

Injustice can take any of these forms and more. Any time someone is treated as less than human – as less than an image-bearer of God – injustice is being done.

The question for you to consider this morning is: Where have others claimed to experience injustice, and you've tended to dismiss their claims?

Maybe it's at your workplace. Maybe the system has worked well for you, but you know others have claimed it has been unfair to them. Or maybe the claim has been made regarding how your run your household. Maybe some have claimed there is injustice in some other institution you are

a part of – your school, our church, or something else. Or, maybe the claim you have tended to dismiss is about injustice in our society as a whole.

It's easy to dismiss these possibilities, but the Bible calls us to see injustice – and it even pushes us to focus on the places it may be where we don't really want to look. It pushes us to consider those different from us.

And so, when it comes to seeing injustice, the focus in the Bible, again and again, is on widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. In the ancient world – and often in our world today as well – these were the populations where injustice was most likely to show up, and so this is where the Bible directed the attention of God's people.

Of course the Bible calls for justice for everyone and it denounces injustice against either the rich or the poor. But it is also noteworthy that the number of Biblical texts that call for justice for the poor outnumber the number of texts calling for justice for the rich by about a hundred to one. [Keller, 7]

We should therefore ask ourselves: What are the equivalent populations in our world today? What are the groups today that, like the widows, orphans, immigrants, and poor of the ancient world, are generally more vulnerable, and more likely to face injustice? And when people in those groups claim there has been injustice in their lives, how likely are we to listen?

Of course there are false claims of injustice in the world. But there are also many times where the cries of the vulnerable for justice meet deaf ears from those around them.

Our text this morning provides a lens to help us see. It shows us a number of patterns of injustice. And as we go through them, I want you to consider if you see any of these patterns in your own heart or mind.

First, we should see in the trial of Jesus that injustice is often not overt. Instead, it actually tries really hard to disguise itself as justice.

These men wanted Jesus dead. But they didn't just take him out back and kill him. They didn't just hire someone to murder him. They didn't even just organize a lynch mob to stone him to death. They wanted it to look like justice. Maybe they even wanted to try to tell themselves it was justice. They had a trial. They went through the legal avenues to have it done officially.

Injustice often tries to disguise itself as justice.

Second, injustice can grow out of easily-dismissible minutia. We listed ten aspects of injustice in the trial of Jesus, and one of the things we should note is how easy it would have been to dismiss any one of them. Well, so the trial is happening at night. So Jesus was hit one time. So the vote happened sooner than normally prescribed. We can see each one as a bit of tedious procedure. We can dismiss its importance. But the result was a massive injustice.

Do we tend to dismiss claims of smaller injustices … or to deny how they can grow into a greater injustice?

Third, injustice often calls us to accept unjust means towards what it tells us is an urgent and noble end. We see that in verse fourteen. Before Jesus is led to Caiaphas, John reminds us how Caiaphas had advised the other leaders that it would be better for Jesus to die than to risk having Rome respond to Jesus's ministry by cracking down on Jerusalem or the Jewish people. We might wonder how many among the council of the Sanhedrin proceeded by reminding themselves that these steps of injustice were necessary for the greater good of the people. We should wonder how often we might follow a similar thought pattern in excusing injustices ourselves.

Fourth, this text shows us that injustice thrives when others are silent. We listed ten actions that were irregular or even illegal. But we have no recording of any objections being made about them that night by those gathered.

It's easy to be silent when we know something is wrong. How often are we tempted to do the same?

Fifth, injustice is often a group activity. There is pressure to fall in line, and more often than not, people do. Caiaphas pressures the court to condemn Jesus in Matthew 26:65, they follow his lead in the very next verse.

And we all know that feeling. We know the pressure we can feel to just go with the group. How often have we done that even though it may have led to injustice for someone else?

Sixth, injustice thrives in darkness. And that darkness is not just for the benefit of the ones overtly committing the wrong. Often it is also for the benefit of those who prefer not to see an injustice done, so they don't feel pressure to do anything.

We might wonder how many Jewish leaders or officials knew something unjust was going on that night … and they stayed home … and were glad not to know the details. They were glad that the darkness kept those acts from their direct sight. Because if they saw it, they might feel like they should do something about it. And doing something might have cost them. But darkness offers deniability. How often are we also thankful for the ways injustice is hidden from our eyes?

We might wonder: What would have happened if someone had defied one of these patterns? If someone had spoken up, or shed light on what was happening, or allowed themselves to see the injustices they didn't want to see? Would such an acknowledgement put a stop to the process leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus? We will never know.

But as we ponder that, we might similarly ask: What would it look like in our lives and around us, if we really saw, and then really stood up to, the injustices around us, rather than averting our eyes?

The trial of Jesus teaches us to see – to really see – injustice. That's the first thing for us to consider.

WHAT WE NEED TO SEEK

The second thing for us to consider is what we need to seek.

And, again unsurprisingly, what we need to seek is justice.

Now, that shouldn't be news. But our text should challenge how we think about that calling in our lives.

Because it is so easy to simply assume that *of course* we seek justice. We are, after all, the good guys. We are the people of God. We are the real instruments of what is right in the world.

But the trial of Jesus stands as a stark rebuke to that self-confidence. The trial of Jesus stands as a stern exhortation about the need for us to be intentional about actively seeking justice as the people of God.

It would be one thing if it were the pagans who went after Jesus, and who led the charge to kill him. Isn't that, after all, what we might expect?

But it's not what we see.

This injustice – this injustice greater than all other injustices, *originates* from the covenant people of God. *They* arrest Jesus. *They* carry out the unjust trial. *They* pressure the pagan forces to carry out the execution.

In this, the greatest injustice of history, the pagan world plays a supporting role at best. It's the covenant community – it's the Church – that has a starring role in this travesty.

The trial of Jesus should stand as a big flashing light, warning us as the Church of God. We are quite capable of calling evil good. We are quite capable of calling injustice justice. We are quite capable of carrying out or being complacent in acts of injustice. History is strewn with examples. Why do we think that *we* are different? Why are we so sure that *we* and that *our* instincts will always be just?

We shouldn't be.

Instead, we should hear the call to seek justice. The call is to be active, not passive, and certainly not self-assured.

Have you been intentional and active in seeking to be just? Have you intentionally evaluated your own behaviors with a critical eye? Have you listened to the claims of others – whether claims against you or against a system you are a part of?

Have you been willing to take the initiative to consider whether you have followed any of the patterns we have mentioned this morning, of turning a blind eye to injustice, whether in your home, in your workplace, in your relationships, or in our culture at large?

Have you challenged yourself to see justice as something you and we actively need to seek, or have you more often, as I'm sure the Sanhedrin often did, spent your energy assuring yourself that *of course* you and the social systems you benefit from are perfectly just?

But even more than that, what would it do to your relationships and for those around you if you were radically committed to seeking justice? If you were always trying to grow in making sure you were rendering to others the good they were due? If you were charitable in hearing those who

claimed to have been wronged? If it bothered you that you sometimes benefited from unfair systems? If you sought to right such wrongs?

How would it change our relationships with non-Christians we are seeking to share the gospel with if we learned the hard reality from the perceptiveness of Pilate and the blindness of the Sanhedrin that it *is* in fact possible for the unbelieving world to spot an injustice before we do?

Seeking justice means asking uncomfortable questions. Seeking justice means being willing to question our own motives. It means being willing to question the procedure of the groups we are a part of. It means being willing to question ways of doing things that might benefit us.

We all want to believe that we are fair – that we are just.

The trial of Jesus reminds us that justice in our thinking, in our words, and deeds, and in the relationships and institutions around us is not automatic. We must pursue it. And we must never assume we have arrived at perfect justice in any area of life. For when we think we are standing firm – that is when we must take heed that we are not about to fall.

WHERE WE FIND HOPE

God calls us to see injustice. God calls us to seek justice.

Thankfully, that is not all God does in this text.

Because if it were, we would be left without hope.

Because left to ourselves, seeking justice can be discouraging.

As we seek to be more just ourselves, we also often see more ways we need to grow, and we can become discouraged.

And as we seek justice in the world around us, we often see that there is so much more to be done, and we can become discouraged.

But even more than that, we can find discouragement when we ourselves are victims of injustice.

We haven't even said much about that yet.

When the powers that be use their resources to use us, or to cast us aside unjustly … when a person or an institution denies our humanity as image-bearers, or seeks to keep us from fulfilling the calling God has given to us … when those in authority refuse to protect or defend us when we have been greatly sinned against … we can become greatly discouraged.

In each of those situations, where are we to find hope?

Well … it's not in our own efforts. And it's not in the justice that is on offer in this world.

As important as such things are, if we really grapple with injustice, then we soon see that only God can bring about true justice.

And we see this clearly in the trial of Jesus, and what follows it.

First, the trial of Jesus reminds us that when we face injustice, we are not alone. God is with us. And God understands. He knows what it's like. Unjust suffering is not abstract to God, but it is part of his real, lived experience. He's been there. In Jesus, God experienced what it is like to be the victim of injustice – to be crushed by an unjust system. And so he is able to comfort us – he is able to be with us as one who understands. [Keller, 187]

But the hope of comfort is not all that God offers.

Because with that comfort, God gives us the sure hope that he can work even through injustice to bring about a greater justice in this world.

The crucifixion of Christ was an act of supreme injustice. But the love of Jesus, shown in the cross, has since called many unjust men and women to repent, and to seek to put off their acts of injustice, and do justice instead.

The trial of Jesus and what came from it offers us the hope that even in the face of apparent defeat, God is at work, and he can bring good.

But again, the hope God offers goes beyond that.

Because our discouragement comes not only from injustice done to us or injustice done around us, but also injustice done *by* us.

What about that?

Here the hope of God shines especially bright. Because the very reason Jesus offered himself up to such treatment – the very reason he accepted the cross – was so that he might save the unjust, and still be just himself.

On the cross Jesus received the penalty that was due to us for our sin and our injustice, so that he might give us forgiveness, and bless us with the reward that was due to him.

For on the cross, Christ himself called on God the Father to forgive the very ones who had put him there. He proclaimed on the cross that he sought not just to forgive the mildly sinful, but even the most sinful, the most unjust – even those who had unjustly convicted and killed him.

From God we receive the hope of comfort when we suffer injustice. We receive the hope that God is at work in this world to bring justice. And we have the hope of salvation, despite our own acts of injustice.

Finally, from God we find the hope of final victory – the assurance that justice will in fact triumph.

Jesus was unjustly convicted. Jesus was unjustly crucified. Jesus died and was buried. But that was not the end of the story. For on the third day, God overturned the injustice the world had meted

out. He raised Jesus from the dead, and in raising him to new and everlasting life, the justice of God was victorious over the injustice of man.

And as he has done for Jesus, so he will do for this world. On the last day, when Christ returns, he will raise all people, and he will right all wrongs.

Justice and mercy will be victorious in Christ. The resurrection is our guarantee of that fact. And we can continue to seek justice in our hearts, and in our lives, and in the world around us, without discouragement, because we know that in Christ justice will in fact be victorious.

And so, confident in the justice and mercy of Christ, let us be people who are willing to see injustice around us. Let us be people who are committed to seeking justice in our lives and in this world. And as we do, let us find our hope in Christ: seeking his comfort, seeking his forgiveness, and confident of his final victory.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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