



The Results of Jealousy

Matthew 27:11-54

Sixth Sunday in Lent, Passion Sunday, April 9th, 2017

First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

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With the 1994 Olympics just weeks away, Nancy Kerrigan was feeling good about her odds. Years of practice, preparation, and organizing had gotten her to a place where a gold medal in women's ice skating was a real possibility. Then something unbelievable happened. Some ruffian clubbed her in the knee with a police baton as she left the ice rink one morning. As it turns out, that ruffian was an associate of a jealous rival and fellow Olympian, Tonya Harding. With a badly injured knee the Olympic medal seemed as distant to Nancy then as when she first started skating.

After the incident there was a media craze. Wall-to-wall coverage displayed the event almost on a constant loop. Songs were even written about it. Comedians joked about it. ESPN turned the whole thing into a documentary. It was headline news across the world. In a word, the event was notorious. Everyone now knew that getting clubbed before an Olympic event was a possibility.

What prompted the attack? Many ideas were suggested, but the answer is simple: jealousy. Nancy was a threat to Tonya's chance at Olympic glory. Nancy was dedicated to her craft. She was disciplined in her practice. She was a natural talent. Not that Tonya wasn't, but Nancy just always seemed to have the edge. Often, when someone has an advantage we tend to want what they have, and at times will do anything to get the advantage. That is the very place where jealousy begins to grow. Of course it starts small. A fleeting thought here or there, but with time it grows without boundaries turning into a constant preoccupation which shapes our words and our actions. In the records of history, jealousy hasn't brought benefit to anyone. Jealousy certainly did not help either Nancy or Tonya.

Jealousy isn't only a brokenness that athletes face. Jealousy is a wrongful longing of the heart that all people face, even religious leaders... We know that to be true, for the Gospel of Matthew points it out in what is known as the Passion Narrative,

Matthew 27:11-54. Verse 18 specifically states “For he [Pontius Pilate] realized that it was out of jealousy that they [the religious leaders] handed him [Jesus] over.” The religious leaders saw Jesus’ actions. They were witness to the miracles he did. They knew who he claimed to be, the Son of God (John 10:36). They listened to him teach in the synagogues and countryside, to countless numbers of people all around the region. They knew of his growing following. Jealousy had overgrown their hearts and minds, and had flowed into their words and actions.

The jealousy of the religious leaders lead to the moment before the ultimate moment in all of history. Pontius Pilate, as the custom of the time went, gave the religious leaders and those gathered before him the freedom to chose one person to be released from prison. Their choice was between the notorious prisoner, Barabbas, and “Jesus who is called the Messiah.” Just like Tonya Harding didn't want to compete against Nancy Kerrigan the religious leaders didn’t want to compete with Jesus. So they persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas to be released and that is what Pontius Pilots did. He released Barabbas because of human jealousy.

The trouble with jealousy is we all have it at some time or another. It’s taken up space in my heart. My two cousins, Nathan and David, are continental professional cyclists. They have stood on the podium of national championships. Together they have nearly 30 state championship titles. When they show up to a race you can hear the group moan and complain. Cyclists don’t want to race against them because they know they haven't a chance at winning. I admit when I see that I want it. In fact, I long for it. Or more accurately, I’m jealous for it. Maybe cycling isn’t your thing, but we all have jealousy for one thing or another. And so we aren’t so different from the religious leaders of the Matthew text this morning. Jealousy leads people to think things they ought not think. To do things they ought not do, like strike someone on the knee with a baton. More than that, jealousy causes us to turn our hearts from God toward things that will never satisfy the longing of our hearts. Earthly things like reputations, gold medals, and state championships are temporal. They fade with time. Jealousy, however, affects words and actions, as well as changes lives.

The Matthew text isn’t just about jealousy and the harm it causes. Mary, a friend of mine, pointed out to me an interesting insight about this text the other week. She told me when the doors of Barabbas’ prison cell swung open and the captive was set free, we see

the grace of Jesus at work even before his crucifixion on the cross. My wife and I refer to those startling revelations as “light bulb moments.” They are when we finally see something or understanding something as it is intended, or in a different way. Mary had turned the light bulb on in my mind and heart. As Jesus was being imprisoned and ultimately crucified by jealous religious leaders he was setting free the imprisoned Barabbas. WOW! Jesus had freed the imprisoned even before his death. The grace of Jesus knows no bounds. It is not limited to those whose life is in good order. It is not limited to those whose actions are perfectly pure. It is given to everyone. Even to notorious prisoners and, dare I say, jealous religious leaders.

During Jesus life he set Barabbas free, but our text for this morning does not end there. It ends with Jesus’ death leaving us in suspense and purposefully so. This Passion Narrative leads us to look forward to Easter Sunday. The ultimate moment in history. For on that day by his rising, Jesus released all people from bondage to sin and freed everyone from the dominion of death. Today, however, we eagerly anticipate the coming of Easter, the very moment when Jesus Christ freed all the imprisoned, the notorious and the jealous. As we carefully consider the places in our lives where jealousy has taken root and we have acted according to our own desires not God’s will we remember that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, set free from the temporal things of this world. In Christ the old life has gone and the new life has begun.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.