

March 25, 2020 – 1 John 3:11-15 & Mark 14:53-65

“If looks could kill.” “Shooting daggers.” “A dirty look.” “An evil eye.” “An icy glare.” “A withering stare.” Our eyes convey a lot of emotion. But maybe most of all, it is our eyes that express anger. Contempt. Rage. And you can see it in just the colorful variety of language we have to communicate our facial expressions.

Our Lenten series this year has been about keeping our eyes on Jesus. But in our Passion Reading this evening, we find some eyes on Jesus that are not looking with love or faith. No, they are looking at him with the deepest hatred a human being can have. The kind of hatred that would engage in cold-blooded, premeditated murder.

Of course, this is nothing new. The Jewish leaders have been looking for this opportunity for weeks. Months. Even years, in some cases. After Jesus' first visit back to Nazareth at the very beginning of his ministry, they were fully prepared to seize him and throw him off a cliff. During one particularly heated argument with the Pharisees, they were literally in the midst of picking up stones to throw at him just before he left. This murderous hatred has been in their hearts for quite some time.

But those incidents were, you might say, in the heat of the moment. There's something particularly heinous about Jesus' trial. Because it's all so carefully planned. They were looking for an opportunity to arrest him. They had carefully crafted this mockery of a trial.

And yet, they did it all with a thin veneer of justice and legal authority. They brought forward witnesses. They called on Jesus himself to testify. They conducted hearings before the Council and the High Priest. Before the King. Before the Roman Governor. All the i's were dotted and the t's crossed. Everything about this was designed to display their righteousness and leadership. But the verdict was already decided before they even began.

And, honestly, their sin was committed before the trial even began. In one of Jesus' first sermons, the Sermon on the Mount, he said that anyone who hates his brother is already guilty of murder. And that is what they have done.

They may be jumping through all the hoops to make it look like they are impartial and unbiased. Just and fair. But they walked into that room with hate in their eyes and murder on their minds. So not only was the verdict already decided before they ever sentenced Jesus, but the sin was already committed before they ever laid a hand on him. They had murdered him in their hearts.

It's no wonder that Jesus doesn't bother answering their questions. He knew what was inside them. He knew how pointless it would be to argue with them. This wasn't a battle of wits, in which the one who knew the law better would win. No, this was a battle of spirits, in which the only way Jesus would win was by remaining the spotless Lamb of God, laying down his life for the world.

The more they talked, the more they condemned themselves. But Jesus has only one thing to say: that he is, indeed, the Christ, the Son of the Blessed... the Son of God. And that this same Son of Man that they were now executing would be the one sitting in power over them on the last day.

Which, of course, only enrages them even more. Because they've seen Jesus' miracles. They know that what he is saying is true. But they can't stand this notion that they should humble themselves to anyone. Even to the Son of God. Even to God himself.

That's what hatred does. That's why it is a type of murder. Because hatred is the offspring of pride and selfishness. Hatred is, in fact, its own sort of idolatry.

Because when we hate someone, we set ourselves up as a god over them. We set ourselves up as their judge. Deciding whether they are fit to live. Whether they deserve the blessings of life and wellbeing that God has chosen to give them. Whether they should suffer for their sins. And whether we should be the one to make them suffer.

When we hate, we put ourselves in the right hand of Power. We put ourselves in Christ's place. And we make a mockery of God's justice in the process.

St John writes extensively about the love we have for our brother in his First Epistle. We read one of those passages earlier and it exactly echoes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: *"Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."*

Simply put, hatred for your brother and faith in Christ cannot coexist. You can't say that Jesus is the Son of God with all authority in heaven and on earth, while also saying that you have the authority to hate and murder another person. A person that Christ loves and redeems and forgives.

Either Christ has all the power. Or he has none of the power. But dividing it between you, so that Jesus can have most of the power, but you can still be your own little god, knowing good and evil, and passing judgement on their worthiness to live? That doesn't work. That is a lie that comes from the serpent himself.

And St John says as much. He writes one chapter later, in chapter 4, verse 20: *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."* To hate your brother means you're not only guilty of murdering him. You're also guilty of lying. Lying to the church. Lying to yourself. Lying to God.

And yet, that is so easy for us to do. Because, after lying to ourselves for so long, I don't think we even realize how much hatred we hold in our hearts. And our political discourse is proof of it.

I know, I know... you don't want to hear about politics right now. And I don't want to talk about them. But it bears some attention on our part. Because the words I see and hear people use about their political opponents are hateful. They truly are. They are bitter and vengeful and filled with contempt. There is no love in them at all. When Jesus was slandered, he kept his mouth shut. But when we feel slandered... oh, boy, do we have a mouthful to say.

I think that just goes to show that the human heart doesn't change. From Adam and Eve to the Jewish leaders to us today. We are all sinners. With hearts bent toward hatred. Bent toward pride and selfishness. Bent toward idolatry. Humbling ourself does not come easily to us.

But it did come easily to Jesus. And by his stripes, we are healed. Those same Jewish leaders who condemned him to death were also the ones that he looked down upon from the cross and said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Father, forgive us, for Jesus' sake. We don't even know how hateful we are.

But we do get reminders. We get reminders of his forgiveness to us. And we get reminders of the forgiveness we are called to give, instead of hatred. And that reminder is called the Lord's Prayer.

*"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."* Forgive us for the hate we have held in our hearts, and teach us to forgive before that hate has time to grow. Show us the incredible love of Christ our Lord. So that we might be filled with love for one another. Make us something more than Pharisees of wrath and self-righteousness. Make us disciples.

Disciples who are eager and longing to see Christ descend on the clouds of heaven. Disciples who readily bend our knee to the Son of Man who sits at the right hand of power. Because he has taken upon himself all our hate, pride, selfishness, and idolatry. Because he has taken upon himself all our sins. And they have died with him, that we might live with him.

Lord, make us those who look upon the world not with dirty looks, evil eyes, icy glares, or withering stares. But with the eyes of love and grace that our Lord had when he looked upon us. That we might be children of the light. And that eternal life may abide in us. Amen.