

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“It was a crime of passion.” How many times have you heard that before in the news. Usually, a criminal, likely a murderer, who supposedly got caught up in the moment and just did, committed the crime. They’ll argue it was a crime of passion, meaning it wasn’t premeditated.

Well, in our sermon text this morning, we hear about a different crime of passion and the innocent victim, Jesus. Now, interestingly enough, this Sunday has a special name, Passion Sunday. As we draw closer to Holy Week, Jesus’ passion draws special attention, coming even more clearly into perspective.

Do you know what his passion is? It’s the word used to describe the entirety of the suffering Jesus faced on his walk to the cross, the culmination of Jesus’ life and his earthly ministry. On the road to the cross, Jesus shows us how it involves passion, his passion for us and our crimes.

We get a glimpse of Jesus here, inside of Jerusalem, during Holy Week, the week leading up to his death. You would think, being fully aware of everything that would happen to him in the coming days, Jesus would be putting his house in order, making sure he said his final good-byes to his loved ones, imparting a few last morsels of knowledge to his disciples. But that’s not what we see here.

Jesus is in the midst of a heated discussion with the Pharisees. Here’s how it began. Jesus was preaching and teaching in the temple courts, and the Pharisees didn’t like it. So they demanded to know where he got his authority...what gave him the right to be doing that? They were obviously trying to trip him up so they could have an excuse to arrest him. Jesus saw right through their evil plan, so he refused to answer their question. Instead, he fought back with a parable, the words for our sermon this morning.

In this parable, a man planted a vineyard, and like what some farmers are known for doing today, he rented out his land to tenants. A pretty good deal for both sides. The owner got the ball rolling by planting the vineyard, his tenants would work it, and then he would get an agreed-upon portion of the crops as payment for rent. And the tenants, they got the remaining percentage of what they grew and harvested for themselves.

Great for both parties, and it was, that is, until the tenants got greedy. Why keep only some of your profits when you could have all the profits, was their thinking. Well, the owner sent a servant to collect his share of the fruits, and the tenants sent him right back to his master, empty-handed. Actually, a little more intense than that as they beat him first, kind of a message to the owner that they weren’t giving up anything.

Well, you can see how patient, how determined the owner was, sending a second and then a third servant to collect his share, and each time, the servant returned, empty-handed, and more severely wounded than the previous one.

I’m guessing at that point, the owner’s options were exhausted, all except for one. “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.” It seems rather odd that he would do

that. No human father who loves his son so very much is going to send him to people who have already shown themselves to be so cruel. Would a father want to take such a chance?

This father did. This was the only possibility that remained. And we hear the terrible consequences of that decision. His son went, the tenants saw him, and immediately they knew what they were going to do. Don't know how they could be so stupid, but somehow they thought, if the son was dead, his inheritance, that vineyard, would be theirs. So they killed him, a crime of passion, I'm sure they would've claimed.

Well, you know how the story ends. Did the father, the owner, back down after that and throw his hands up in defeat? Of course not. He went and killed those wicked tenants and gave his vineyard to other, faithful tenants.

Can you see the meaning of this parable? You should be able to. Even the Pharisees saw how Jesus was talking about them, as the unfaithful, the wicked tenants. They had been given a trust by God, to produce fruits of faith. But they had rejected God so many times. And so he had sent his servants, prophets, John the Baptists, others to bring these wicked tenants to repentance, but to no avail.

So, the only option left? "The son whom I love"...aka Jesus. And they saw him, and, from early on, they were salivating at the chance to do their worst to him. Jesus was dead on when he quoted that passage from Psalm 118, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."

Do you know what the word reject means? In the original language, that word paints the picture of discarding something after it has failed to meet the test. Jesus had failed to match the idea of the Messiah which the Pharisees and their allies had in mind, a strong, physical king, coming to put down their enemies. But that wasn't Jesus, so they rejected him. Jesus knew that would happen. Jesus knew they would kill him. All part of his passion.

So from there, his enemies left, looking for the right window of opportunity to open up where they could nab Jesus and get rid of him for good...their own crime of passion. Not that they didn't premeditate it because killing Jesus had been in the works for a long time. But their imminent crime would stem from passion, a bitter passion and obsession with doing away with the self-acclaimed "Son of God." And their crime would lead to Jesus' passion, his walk to the cross.

Might you be like those tenants as well? And we exclaim with the others who heard Jesus' parable, "May this never be!" Or as the disciples cried in astonishment on Maundy Thursday when Jesus told them one of them would betray him, "Surely not I, Lord?" Surely God's Son would not die at the hands of his enemies! Surely we, surely I wouldn't be the cause of his death!

But it was. It was our crimes, too, that led to his passion, to his death on the cross. It's not hard to imagine ourselves not unlike the tenants of the vineyard. God wants to see fruit in us, which would equate to our following his commands, our faithful living.

Does he see it a hundred percent of the time? 100% sinless living? We of course know the answer to that. So God sends his servants to call for those fruits. He gives us his Word to show us our sins and to

call for repentance. He sends us other believers to approach us in our sins and to encourage godly living.

And we welcome them with open arms, right? We just love to have others criticize us, and even more so to point out our sinful actions and words and attitudes and tell us they're not God-pleasing, right? And then we're so willing to just confess those sins and turn right around from our sinful living, right?

Not quite how it usually goes, does it. No, when someone approaches me about my sin, my sinful nature screams out, "You can't tell me how to live my life! Why are you talking about my sins when you should be minding your own business and worrying about your own sins!" And we throw them out.

Well, God has also sent us Jesus, looking for those same fruits. But like those tenants, do we reject Jesus? How do we reject him? Every time I say "no" to stopping in my sinning, that's a rejection of Jesus and a rejection of what he wants me to do. And it's my crimes that lead to his passion.

Every time I yell at my wife and don't practice loving patience with her, that's a nail in his flesh. Every time I get greedy, focusing how I can get more for myself, but at the same time completely ignore God and how I can give back to him, that's a nail in his flesh. Every time I skimp on God's Word because "I don't have time" or "I know it all already" or "It really serves no purpose in my life," that's a nail in his flesh. Every time you and I sin instead of producing fruit, that's a rejection of Jesus. That's a nail in his flesh.

Our crimes drove him to the cross, but it shouldn't be him there. It should be me. It should be you. Us, paying the punishment for our own sins. Us suffering the wrath of hell for our own iniquities. Us facing eternal condemnation, and all our own fault.

But, "he was pierced for our transgressions," "he was crushed for our iniquities," God's Word tells us. "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us," God's Word assures us. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," God's Word declares.

Do you understand what God has done for us through Jesus? Not only did he send Jesus to try to turn us from our sins, from our crimes. But the crimes we've already committed, God made those crimes, our crimes, the crimes of Jesus' passion, the crimes which became Jesus' during his passion, during his death on the cross.

And the whole reason behind that death, Jesus bearing our guilt, our punishment, our crimes, our sins? Passion...compassion...love. Yes, we deserve condemnation for our crimes, but God shows love and compassion to us instead. Yes, we ought to be dashed on the stone the builders rejected, on Jesus, whom we reject every time we sin. But instead, God shows us passion and compassion through his Son, whom he loves.

You notice how Jesus was so open about talking about his upcoming death. He didn't try to run from his fate or try to deter the Pharisees from carrying out their murderous plan. It was his cross to bear, all part of his passion, his walk to the cross, and he went willingly. There, Jesus endured the verdict of hell

and all of its punishments so we don't have to. His gracious love won out, canceling out every sin ever committed.

And now, because of his death, along with all his bitter passion, you are forgiven. In God's eyes, those crimes we've committed, it's as if they never even existed. Our crimes have been paid for in full because Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose.

The crimes are gone. And all that's left? Is passion, not the passion of Jesus' walk to the cross, but the passion we're more familiar with, the intense love and affection. We are objects of God's passion, the ones whom he lavishes with his love. We see it in our forgiveness. We see it in all the blessings God pours out day after day for us, his sons and daughters whom he loves.

And now, we also see his love in his patience. The fact that God doesn't put us to death every time we stray and try to give him and his servants the boot out of our lives, that's patience. The fact that God continually comes to us, looking for repentance, and then looking for godly living, even though he doesn't always find it in us, that's patience. The fact that God shows us never-ending compassion, continually forgiving our sins, all on account of Jesus' passion, that's patience. That's love. That's passion.

We're almost there. This whole season of Lent, we've been walking the road with Jesus to the cross, and now, we're almost at the threshold of Jerusalem. The Pharisees, they're off, making the final preparations to hand our Savior over to be killed. His death, it's inevitable. The road to Calvary, it's inevitable.

But that road, it involves passion. The intense suffering Christ endured on the path to the cross for us and our crimes, yes that's passion. But what kept him going the whole way, that's true passion. His undeserved love for sinners, going through all that suffering for us, so we can be his forever, that's true passion. And because Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose, we will live as objects of God's passion all the rest of our days, and there's no crime in that. Only love. Amen.