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Lenten Midweek 2
February 21, 2018
Matthew 26:59-61
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

[Adapted from Rev. Brent Kuhlman's sermon series in *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 27, Part 2 (Concordia: St. Louis), 54-56.]

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

Jesus stands accused, arrested, and handcuffed in the courtroom of the solemn and very religious Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

It's up to these leaders to ascertain and speak the truth—the verdict—and provide justice. Caiaphas, the high priest, presides. Caiaphas, the high priest, sits in the seat of Moses to judge only the most important of cases. You'd never expect there to be false witnesses and false testimony made before the high priest. Courtrooms are sacred. Only the truth should be spoken in court. No lies. No slander, falsehood, or exaggerations of any kind. Not even a white lie or a teeny, tiny fib. After all, God gave the Eighth Commandment to protect and to build up the neighbor's reputation. Let's recite it together from our insert:

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

Have you ever had to testify in court? Before you sit in the witness stand, you have to raise your right hand, put your left hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help you God! Serious stuff. Serious-as-a-heart-attack stuff. In the end, someone's standing, reputation, name, character—and perhaps someone's life—are on the line. So, as God is your witness, you'd better tell the truth and nothing but the truth in court—or anywhere, for that matter.

Surely the Sanhedrin court wants to hear the truth about Jesus, right? The whole truth and nothing but the truth, right?

Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that thy might put him to death.

They wanted to hear witnesses alright. But they deliberately want *false witnesses!* They lust for liars to give *false testimony* against Jesus so that they can put him to death. The trial is rigged. The fix is in! Corruption in the legal system? It's definitely illegal—even downright criminal.

Would the authorities, Israel's most religious and very best, do that? To Jesus? They sure would—and not even blink an eye. And so would you. Their story is your story. Their sin is your sin. You're experts in giving false witness. You've got it down pat. It's part of who you are. You're so very adept at betraying, slandering, and saying the worst about people. It's harder for you to *not* say anything bad. You're especially good at badmouthing those who're the closest to you. Even Jesus!

Yes, even Jesus! Even if it kills him. You probably don't even realize how you do it. And you probably don't even mean to do it. I sure hope you don't mean to. But you do. In the courtroom of everyday life. How? One of the most prominent ways is this: when your heart, body, and mouth are perpetually missing from the Sunday Divine Service, you bear false witness against Jesus. You ruin and murder his reputation. Really, you do. Chronic absence from church speaks volumes not only to your fellow Christians—especially your children—but also to the world.

When you choose other things over Jesus by not attending the Divine Service, you slanderously preach and maliciously proclaim that Jesus doesn't really matter to you. You testify that his Good Friday dying and Easter rising aren't that big a deal—nothing at all really, as far as you're concerned. That Jesus really isn't God *for you*. As a result, his reputation in your family, in your community, and in this congregation is harmed if not ruined by such false witness against him.

Well, in the Sanhedrin courtroom, false witness after false witness comes forward. Lie after lie is spewed against completely innocent Jesus. No one cares to defend his reputation or speak well of him. But it isn't working. All their misinformation and all their propaganda aren't clinching Jesus' execution.

Finally, two false witnesses come forward. They're false but different from the others. They figure it's best to just quote Jesus verbatim, using one of his recent sermons. It was really a quite provocative and confrontational sermon that raised many an eyebrow. Like fingernails on a chalkboard, it made the religious and political Jerusalem VIPs squirm.

“This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’”

Jesus doesn't object. That's what he preached. The false witnesses tell the truth—or close enough to it. Jesus actually said, “Destroy this temple,” as in “*you* destroy this temple” (Jn 2:19). Okay, the better to accuse him by making him claim to destroy the temple. But then Jesus did really say, “and in three days I will raise it up.” Isn't that something? The court desperately wants false witness, but the liars actually tell the truth! Jesus did say those words in a sermon.

Only Jesus wasn't referring to the huge stone temple building in Jerusalem that King Herod built. Instead, Jesus was preaching about himself in that sermon—because all good sermons are about Jesus. The “temple” that would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days was *his body*. In other words, Jesus preached his death and resurrection—because all good sermons are about Jesus' death and resurrection. “Destroy this temple [my body] and in three days I'll rebuild it [raise it from the dead].” Apostle John writes, “But he was speaking about the temple of his body” (Jn 2:21). And so, Jesus preached a Good Friday and Easter Sunday sermon—because all good sermons are Good Friday and Easter Sunday sermons.

What does this mean? What does Jesus' sermon that his body is the temple mean? It means that Jesus is declaring himself to be God, that his body—his flesh—is the dwelling of God on earth! Or to be even more blunt—that he is Immanuel, God with us, templing or tabernacling in the flesh! In his body born of the Virgin Mary, all the fullness of God temples or tabernacles in the world.

Well, this truth that Jesus did in fact preach—that even came from the mouths that were paid to break the Eighth Commandment—is just too much for the Sanhedrin's ears. They can't handle the truth, especially the high priest Caiaphas. So they take what's true and twist it. They make Jesus the liar, the deceiver. They won't stomach the truth. This preacher's body can't be God's dwelling-place on the earth! There's just no way in...you know...that this man's body can be the divine temple in the flesh! He can't be God in the flesh! He can't be Immanuel! No preacher man can say that! It's got to be a lie. The biggest and worst religious lie ever told. Blasphemy!

So the court judges that Jesus must die.

JESUS MUST DIE JUST AS HE IN TRUTH SAID...FOR THOSE WHO IN FALSE WITNESS
BREAK THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT.

What the court meant for evil, Jesus turns and uses for good. Your good. Your eternal good. For your salvation. All your breaking of the Eighth Commandment—all your slandering, gossiping, false witnessing, and lying because you don't fear, love, and trust in God above all things—Jesus willingly takes from you. He insists on it. All your sin is now his. It all belongs to him because he carries it and answers for it in his temple—that is, in his body on the cross.

Jesus does what must be done with your sin in order to save you, the sinner. In his temple (that is, his body), he wraps himself with all your sin and gets damned with it. Then he pulls off an Easter Sunday three days later in order to tell you the truth. And the truth is this: You, yes, you, sinner, are forgiven. He doesn't count your sin against you anymore because it was all counted against him.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I'm here to tell you that Jesus *is* God in the flesh *for you!* For your salvation. His Good Friday “destroy this temple” death and his “in three days I will rebuild it” Easter Sunday resurrection means that he speaks no evil of you. He outright refuses to speak evil of you and instead speaks only good of you and for you like this: “You see my servant [*names of people present*]? Oh sure, they're sinners. But they're *my* sinners! I died for them. I've forgiven them. I've put my name on them in Holy Baptism. They are my forgiven holy ones!”

Now the Lord Jesus has Eighth Commandment good use for you. You want to be used for good, don't you? Of course you do. His good word of forgiveness enlivens you to have Eighth Commandment mouths and tongues. That means you use your lips to defend your neighbor's reputation, to stand up for your neighbor's character, to speak well of your neighbor, to explain everything about your neighbor in the kindest way. That means you use your mouth and tongue differently—to edify people, to build them up, to tell the truth about them.

Most especially, you use your mouth and tongue to tell the truth about yourself and about Jesus! That's what “confess” means. You stand up for Jesus' reputation. You proclaim in word and deed that Jesus' temple body was destroyed/died on the Friday we call good and then rebuilt/resurrected in three days *for you*. That's what it took for Jesus to save you!

You tell the truth that Jesus is your Savior by what you say and by what you do. One way is that you will now go to church on Sunday to worship him. You'll confess loud and clear

with your mouth what's in your heart: that Jesus is Lord, that he redeemed you, a lost and condemned person, with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.

With your mouth, you'll pray to him—depending on him alone to be God *for you*. You'll look to him for all your good—bodily and spiritually.

With your mouth, you'll eat and drink his crucified and risen body and blood in the Lord's Supper. You'll confess what is true—that his body and blood are truly *for you*, your forgiveness, as you give a full-throated "Amen."

That's speaking well of Jesus. That's telling the truth of Jesus. That's building up his divine reputation as the Savior of sinners—you, me, all people in all the world.

In the name of Jesus.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.