

Binkley Baptist Church

“Who Betrayed Jesus?”

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

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Palm Sunday

Luke 22:47-53 (Judas)

No one names their child Judas. It's a name identified totally and completely with betrayal. Judas' act of betrayal will send Jesus to an arrest, a spurious “trial” in the night, a brutal scourging and beating, and his torturous death on a Roman cross. “Judas, who betrayed Jesus”—that's how we envision the engraving on the tombstone.

Betrayal, acts of betrayal, are the awful things done which “hand over or deliver or expose to an enemy by treachery or disloyalty.” When you think of Judas—as we all do annually at this time—isn't that what you conjure up? In Dante's *Inferno*, betrayers are cast into the lowest circle of hell. Societies reserve their harshest judgement for those who commit some act of betrayal. Cassius, Brutus, Judas. It helps us to freeze villains in time and for all eternity, to keep certain persons—not really as persons but as one-dimensional flat characters easily recognized as “evil,” I mean why complicate matters, right? We need to label, brand, then ban them from our sight. Or at least write up the story in such a way as to leave no doubt that there's to be absolutely no forgiveness offered, or even contemplated.

The gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—portray Judas with nuanced differences. None of them give us his “call” story into the band of brothers who decide to follow Jesus. He just shows up on the list. Here's what we know from the scriptures about Judas:

He was keeper of the common purse, and, we're told, would occasionally dip into those funds for his own desires. On one occasion, Judas was angered by the act of devotion from the woman who poured an expensive vial of perfume on Jesus' head complaining that it was wasteful—that the proceeds could have been sold and given to the poor. Did Judas believe that Jesus' own pending life poured out was wasteful, too? The scripture pointedly says that his concern for the poor was a ruse.

At the last supper on that Maundy Thursday Jesus, from the table, said that one of the twelve would betray him. “Surely, not I,” they all said. In Matthew's account Judas was sitting next to Jesus when he said that he would be betrayed by the one “who dips his hand into the bowl with me.” In this position of honor and trust, the later betrayal is painful to watch unfold.

In the garden of Gethsemane the gospels given different accounts of what it was that Judas did and why he did it.

In Matthew's and Mark's retelling, Judas had arranged as a sign to the authorities, “The one I will kiss is the man—arrest him.” Then he delivers the kiss of death. In Luke and John they add that a devil, a demon entered him prior to his betrayal.

Judas sealed the betrayal with a kiss in the garden. Judas, “who betrayed Jesus.” It was the simplest of signals and the means by which the soldiers knew whom to arrest.

In John there is no kiss, no identification at all of Jesus; Judas was “standing with them,” the authorities. Turn-coat Judas.

Why? How could he do it? Was it for money and out of greed? Matthew says for thirty pieces of silver he tipped off the authorities in the darkness of the garden. Was it disillusionment with the message and ministry of Jesus? Was he

worried about his status in the pecking order of importance (as they all were)? Was he reacting to a perceived slight? Was he impatient with the slow pace of a revolution he believed Jesus supposedly was leading? Who knows? This question of “Why?” has left a lot of room to speculate and consider why someone so close, so trusted would betray Jesus. As our hymn asked, “who would ever have believed it?”

Betrayal shatters the fragile bonds that hold us together, and when trust is broken, it can destroy homes, families, and congregations. There’s no white-washing of Judas’ act—his act of deceit (for whatever reason) had severe consequences. Betrayal may have been the deepest pain Jesus experiences in the days and hours ahead.

It’s hard to find any sympathy or compassion for ole Judas, isn’t it? He’s beyond God’s willingness to forgive, isn’t he? God’s limitless grace does reach its end at Judas’ doorstep, right? If there’s one person beyond reconciliation, well, it’s “Judas, who betrayed Jesus.” Isn’t that right?

Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Seminary, theorizes that one reason we show such disgust and show betrayers so little compassion is our fear that we all have some Judas chromosome with us. We despise the very thought that we too are capable of betraying trust. Barnes says:

Could it be that the real reason we show betrayers so little compassion is that we’re afraid there is some Judas chromosome within all of us? We hate the thought that we too are capable of betraying trust. When Jesus claimed that one the Twelve would betray him, the anxiety within all of their souls rushed to the surface. “Surely not I, Lord?” They might as well have said, “I’ve been worried about that, but I thought I had it under control.”

The sin that is most difficult to forgive in others is always the one we struggle against in our own lives. This is particularly true if we have lied to ourselves about our trustworthiness so often that we no longer think we have a dark side. None is as merciless to others as the one who has no mercy on his own capacity for evil.

In Jesus’ last hours none of the disciples was a model of faithfulness. Peter denied knowing his Lord three times. After the awful crucifixion was over, none of the Twelve even attended to Jesus’ body. At a time when trustworthiness could have endangered them, all the disciples failed.

That terrifies us. We think we are doing OK on our commitments now, but we just don’t know about the terrible Judas chromosome. When will it kick in like a cancer and destroy a life built on righteous resolve? Since we all live with the possibility of betrayal, we fear Judas more than we fear the cross. The cross is a symbol of heroic self-sacrifice. But Judas is a symbol of the evil within us. (Christian Century, Feb. 27, 2002).

We will betray Jesus if we’re tempted to write off our own little betrayals pretending that they don’t really hurt anyone—let’s rethink that.

It’s a terrible thing to have one’s name identified with one of the most pitiful and awful events in our human history.

My sophomore year of college I had an American History class with a fellow BSU’er named June Porter. June was from Rockwall, TX, a Dallas suburb. I was born and grew up in Dallas. As the course progressed to the election of 1960, June disappeared from the class, and I noticed she was absent from BSU events as well. Two weeks passed then the banner headline from the Daily Texan, the UT student paper, “Oswald’s Daughter Attends UT.” We never saw her again. We supposed that someone from Rockwall tipped off the paper—maybe for 30 pieces of silver, who knows? Lee Harvey Oswald was her biological father, the assassin of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 on the downtown streets of my hometown.

Years later June emerged to tell her story in People Magazine. Her mother Marina met and married Jim Porter, who adopted June and her younger sister. They lived quietly in Rockwall and attended a Baptist church. Baptized and given a new identity—child of God and disciple of Jesus. But, in the words of Toni Morrison, it's never too early in the day to beat back the past.

We knew none of this at the time. All we would later learn is that she must have been afraid (and for good reason) to share her story with her new community in Austin. She transferred and graduated from Brown.

Can any of you here imagine what burden it is to know such shame and scorn? Can any of you know the guilt by association terror she must have felt? Can any of you imagine the response of Jesus?

In Matthew's gospel story Judas tries to undo that which he had done. After feeling remorse he said, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood (Matthew 27:3)." He returns the money and then takes his own life.

The easiest thing for religious people to do is to blame and shame, to scapegoat, denounce, and indict. Cast suspicions. Expose someone to scornful ridicule. I mean we must keep villains and enemies in their rightful place...consigned to hell. Showing mercy to betrayers and failures is so weak...right? Some New Testament scholars believe that very thing has been done by the gospel evangelists here in today's texts to brother Judas. Did they not remember Jesus' word from the cross, "Father, forgive...?"

There is an old legend about Judas that Madeleine L'Engle tells. The legend is that after his death Judas found himself at the bottom of a deep and slimy pit. For thousands of years he wept his repentance, and when the tears were finally spent, he looked up and saw way, way up a tiny glimmer of light. After he had contemplated it for another thousand years or so, he began to try to climb up towards the light. The walls of the pit were dark and slimy, and he kept slipping back down. Finally, after great effort, he neared the top and then he slipped and fell all the way back down to the bottom. It took him many years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of grief and repentance, and then he started to climb up again. After many more falls and efforts and failures, he reached the top and dragged himself into an upper room with twelve people seated around the table. "We've been waiting for you, Judas," Jesus said. "We couldn't begin till you came."

Look at the lovely art-piece on the front of your bulletin, the scene is called "Feeding Judas" by P. Solomon Raj. He stays at the table with us.

When L'Engle heard that story at a minister's conference, many of the gathered clergy were offended by the idea of Judas being welcomed back into Jesus' inner circle. She says, "I was horrified at their offense! Would they find me, too, unforgivable?" If you want and need limits to those beyond redemption go right ahead and set them but be aware that Judas, even Judas, is forgiven and welcomed back to the table. That poem, also on your bulletin cover, says it so well: "so when we all condemned him as of every traitor worst...remember that of all his men our Lord forgave him first. (D. Ruth Etchells, "At the Cross").

Jurgen Moltmann, theologian, once was asked about universalism. "I hope I won't see certain people in heaven...but I think Jesus does." Miroslav Volf, another theologian, says: At the heart of the cross is Christ's not letting the offender remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in.

O the deep, deep love of Jesus. Deep and wide and broad is Jesus' love. I have no idea what you see when you look at the cross but I still see love in the face of betrayal and denial and disappointment. I see Jesus, who forgives Judas.

Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.