

Meeting the People of Passion Week, Pt. 3

Judas

Matthew 26: 14-16; 27: 3-5

**First Presbyterian Church
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Judas fascinates us. He's an enigma. He meets a horrible fate. He's a key player in Passion Week. But in the Gospels, we don't hear anything about Judas until he protests Mary of Bethany's use of the expensive ointment on Jesus. He's listed among the 12 men called to be Jesus' closest disciples. But then Judas stays in the background until he betrays his master.

What motivated Judas? There's a bit of implication that Judas had a problem with money. Thirty pieces of silver was only about \$10,000. That's not really the kind of money that could set you up for life. There had to be more to it. Why did Judas even need to betray Christ's location to the authorities? Jesus taught openly during the day. It wouldn't have been that hard to have someone follow Jesus back to the rooms where they stayed. Did Judas think Jesus had begun to believe his own press and gotten too big for his spiritual britches? Was Judas trying to force Jesus' hand, make him rise up and take the kingship? Was he just playing a role someone had to play, a divinely appointed adversary? Was he simply jealous? We just aren't told. All we can do is consider the dynamics of betrayal as we have experienced them in our own lives. And that's a good thing. Judas had a unique role in history. But what he did was not nearly the worst thing ever done. Nor was it something I'd never do. There's a Judas in me, and the mystery of his story makes me deal with him.

To betray someone means literally to hand them over. In the New Testament, the same word is used for *handing over* important news or *handing over* someone to the authorities.¹ Paul begins his summary of the Lord's Supper saying, "For I received from the Lord what also I *delivered* to you... (I Cor. 12:3). Delivering is handing over, giving someone the message you received. Then, in the very same sentence, Paul uses the very same word again, "Jesus on the night when he was *betrayed* took bread...." Jesus got handed over to the officials when Judas led them to him. So today, in betrayal, I hand you over to financial ruin if I siphon off the funds you gave me to invest. I hand over our marriage to ruin if I break our vows. I break your trust if I take your secret and hand it to the world on Facebook. All betrayal is seizing power from someone by trading their trust for some other kind of gain for me. I hand over our bond of trust however I break faith with you.

Betrayal leaves us with a sick feeling. It's heartbreaking like a death to be betrayed by a friend. It's embarrassing, even shameful, to discover how much money you lost by trusting a scoundrel. It's shattering to realize how cruelly people lie, squeal, steal, cheat, cut you out, deceive, and all the while keep smiling at you and acting like everything is fine. "Judas, do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" Yep, that's how we do it. We cut the deepest the one's we're closest to. We play the role and sink the knife.

The Gospel of John's account chills us with the details of the meal in which Judas so deliberately owned his role. The disciples were gathered around the table sharing the food placed in common bowls. They reclined as they ate, leaning against each other. Jesus began to grow troubled. He spoke the reason for his distress. "One of you will betray me." His shocked disciples asked, "Who is it?" So Jesus told them. "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it" (Jn. 13: 26). So then Jesus took a piece of the pita-style bread, and dipped in the bowl, pinching up a mouthful of food with it. Then Jesus offered that scoop to Judas. This was the moment when Judas could have turned back. He could have declined that morsel. "No, no, I'm not going to do it. I won't accept the sign." But Judas instead passed the point of no return. He took the bread and ate it in front of them all. It's as if he said, "I am that man." And so his heart was wide open for Satan to enter him. He gave over his free will and was now a pawn in the Enemy's plans. Don't we know well that moment? When inside your mind, your heart, you cross the line. I'm going to do this. And suddenly you are enthralled. You become a captive: to the drink, to the adultery, to the gaming, to the swindling and the wounding. After Judas leaves the table the Gospel says with horrifying simplicity, "And it was night" (Jn. 13:30).

We don't know why Judas betrayed Jesus. And that silence in God's Word is instructive to us. Betrayal is just what we do to each other. Judas was not in a special category. We read these words of Johan Heerman in our Lenten guide,

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended?
That we to judge thee have in hate pretended?

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.
"Twas I Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee.
I crucified thee.

Judas lives in my heart. I routinely hand him over as I trade my communion with him for little greeds, little lusts, little revenges, little gossips that give me a moment's pleasure. Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.

Judas conducted his betrayal on a big stage. But in its core, it was just garden variety, ordinary human betrayal of God's intent for us. It doesn't even need an explanation. It's just a sad fact of who we are. It's almost boring, like all sin turns out to be.

But what fascinates me is Judas' attempt at repentance. It's what I most want to know about. If I enact betrayal, is there any hope of getting back, back to God, back to the people I hurt, back to myself?

Matthew's Gospel tells us that when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, "he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood'" (Mt. 27: 3-4). That appears hopeful to me. When we have sinned, when we have betrayed, it's a great start to begin with owning it, "I have sinned by betraying..." Judas wanted to give back the money. He wanted to undo what he had done. Could we just hit rewind? He wanted to shift responsibility away from himself and back to the authorities who actually enacted the arrest and trial.

Of course, they laughed in his face. "What do your guilt feelings matter to us? There's no going back. Work it out for yourself." When we break faith with loved ones to make a deal with someone else, we discover there is no mercy in sin. We get left alone. We get left to work out the consequences.

And it can lead to despair. I wonder if at some point Judas recalled the Scriptures about the price he was paid to betray Jesus. In Exodus there are long lists of appropriate restitution to be made for situations of negligence or deliberate harm. In one verse we read, "If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver" (Ex. 21:32). The price of a slave gored to death by an ox was 30 pieces of silver. If that same ox had killed a free Hebrew, the owner would have had to pay with his own life. But a slave, a foreigner? 30 pieces of silver, a third of a year's wages, ought to do nicely. Judas betrayed the incarnate Son of God for the price of a gored slave. Did it dawn on him as he threw the money back how cheaply he had sold his Lord?

Philippians tells us that Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking

the form of a slave and humbled himself all the way unto death (Phil. 2: 5-11). Jesus willingly let himself be sold for a price that was less than human. He gave himself over to a cheap betrayal by twisted hearts.

And when Judas realized it, he couldn't stand it. There was no going back. So he felt like there was no going on. He despaired unto death. Judas hanged himself.

Did it have to end that way? Was that his only choice? So they didn't take the money back. What else could Judas have done? I asked that question in several groups this week. I got some great responses. One woman burst out, "I'd tell him, 'Go back to Jesus! Just go right back to Jesus!'" Others said, "Go stand with him. Shout out his innocence!" Another said, "Go to the cross, and cry out your love for him. Stay with him through his suffering. Be counted among the few who did not flee."

We can't often undo the consequences for our betrayals. When we come awake to what we have done, the pain is great. We will be tempted to move to self-protection. To defend ourselves, justify breaking faith, or even try to make a new deal. Or we will be tempted to despair. To embrace the hopelessness of what we have done. And so to end our lives slowly through drugs, alcohol, fights, prostitution or other great risks. Or to end our lives quickly through suicide. We who handed over someone who trusted us now try to take our lives in our own hands by taking our lives in an attempt to end pain. Neither will work. We only create greater pain and despair.

The harder path is the path that leads to life. To own what we have done. To hang in there with the despair. To put our lives in God's hands. We who seized our lives as our own as we broke faith with others can, in repentance, commit our souls into God's hands. Betrayal is a handing over of someone who trusted us to being broken and alone. Keeping faith is handing over our lives again to Christ Jesus. We live in the pain crying out for Christ to do his mending, restoring work.

What if Judas had endured two more days of his despair? What if he had stayed alive and seen Jesus on Easter Sunday? I asked several groups this week to imagine this conversation between Jesus and Judas on Easter afternoon. It's amazing how quickly people recalled the words of Jesus from other encounters. In fact, we could construct a whole conversation from Jesus' earlier words:

Jesus, is it really you?

Take heart! It is I, do not be afraid (Mt. 14:27).

You're, you're not dead?

I am the resurrection and the life! (Jn. 11:25).

I didn't kill you after all?

You would have no authority over me at all unless it was given you from above (Jn. 19:11).

But am I lost? Can I find my way back?

I am the way, the truth, and the life! (Jn. 14:6).

I'm sorry, so sorry, Jesus, I'm so sorry.

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Lk. 19: 10).

But I am guilty of innocent blood!

This is my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Mt. 26:28).

Could I, even I, be cleansed?

Man, your sins are forgiven you (Lk. 5: 20).

It's not the depth of our sin that keeps us from him. It's our refusal to go to him when we are ashamed, guilty and broken that keeps us in despair. It's not the mess we have made that prevents the mending, restoring work of God. It's our failure to stick around in faith to see what God can do once we put our lives back into his hands.

This conversation between Judas and Jesus was imaginary. It did not take place in our world. We can't know if it took place in the next world. We know that what Judas did was not as bad as so many sins we read about in the Bible which were forgiven. But we cannot know or say for certain what happens beyond. All we know is that Christ Jesus urges us now, this moment, "Put yourself in my hands. Stop handing me over to others. Hand yourself to me. Hand your sins to me. Hand your problems to me. Come clean. No more betrayal. Give it to me now. Right now."

Judas is a warning to us. We can get so far down the wrong road that we might despair of ever getting back, and thus end our lives with those crushing words, "And it was night." But Judas is also an encouragement. As long as we have breath and will, it is not too late. When we return to Jesus, he does not throw the coins of our betrayal back in our face. He receives us. And he is able to mend more than we can imagine. Hear this. More than we can imagine. This is the word to your heart. This is the word Jesus asks you to share with other hearts. It's not too late. Hold on. More is coming. God can make more than you can imagine from the mess you made. Stay in the pain. Stay in the regret. Turn it to repentance and

crying out. Say what Jesus said on the cross. When he could have betrayed both us and his Father by leaving the cross and protecting his life. He could have broken faith with us and we would have been lost. But instead, he stayed in the pain and cried out with his last breaths, “Father into your hands, I commit my spirit (Lk. 23:41).

Judas broke faith. We all break faith. But that doesn't have to be the end. We go in faith to our Father. We turn to his Son Jesus in faith that he can do more than we can possibly see right now. Don't give up. Don't give into despair. Don't stay stuck with your life in your hands. Keep the faith. Keep faith. Go to God with the truth of your whole spotted, stained, broken being and cry out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Then hang on. See what he does. And then join us, join us in telling those upon whom night has descended, “Just wait a bit longer. Dawn breaks. Dawn breaks soon. Until then, stay with us. We're not leaving. We'll keep watch together for God's dawning light.”

¹ The Greek word is *parodidomi*: to hand over, to give or deliver over, to betray