

# **"ON THE NIGHT HE WAS BETRAYED ..."**

## **Maundy Thursday Meditation**

**April 18, 2019**

**Text: Matthew 26:14-30; 27:1-5**

"On this day, Christ gathered with His disciples in the upper room. On this day, Jesus said: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' On this day, Christ our God gave us this holy feast, that we who eat this bread and drink this cup may here proclaim His holy sacrifice and be partakers of His resurrection, and at the last day may reign with Him in heaven. And on this day, Christ the Lamb of God gave Himself into the hands of those who would slay Him."

*(from the Book of Common Worship, c. 1993)*

When it was evening, He sat at table with the twelve disciples;  
and as they were eating, He said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."

Matthew 26:20-21, RSV

### **"On the night He was betrayed ..."**

As we just read, at the Last Supper Jesus said He would be betrayed by the one *"who dips his hand into the bowl with me."* There were most likely several of these bowls at the table, and those sitting near each other would share bowls. This meant that the betrayer was a friend, sitting close to Him, seated at a position of intimacy, honor and trust ... all of which makes this betrayal more painful. It always cuts deeply when one close to you shows himself or herself to be faithless.

Why did Judas betray Jesus? We really don't know the reason, or reasons. Lots of guesses have been made over the centuries. Did he do it for the thirty pieces of silver? Was that it? Was he just a greedy, grubby, corrupt treasurer as John seems to allude in John chapter 12? Or, as we speculated Palm Sunday, did Judas do it because he was trying to force Jesus' hand, trying to compel Him to action? Maybe Judas' intentions were good; maybe Judas wanted to see some action, some activity, some program implemented to deliver the people from the oppressor, and Jesus just seemed so maddingly slow to act, even borderline defeatist. Maybe Judas thought if he could compel Jesus to do something, anything, *then* God's kingdom would come.

We just don't know the reason or the reasons.

Matthew's account has an interesting little observation not found in the other Gospels. Matthew tells us when Jesus announced one of them would betray him, all of them exclaimed, one after the other, *"Surely not I, Lord?"* Except Judas. Judas said, according to Matthew, *"Surely not I, Rabbi?"*

Was that it? Did Judas see Jesus only as a "rabbi," a teacher, and not as his Lord? After all, Jesus is so much more than just a teacher. A teacher gives advice and lessons which we may take or leave; however, a Lord gives commands which we are to obey ... **if** we are serious about calling Him Lord. We know the verses, such as Romans 10, *"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is LORD,' (not just a teacher) and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* Or Acts 16, *"Believe in the LORD Jesus (not just a Rabbi named Jesus) and you will be saved."* Maybe Judas had never come to recognize and/or acknowledge Jesus as his Lord and Master. In Exodus 21:32 we read the price paid to reimburse someone for a servant was thirty pieces of silver. Is that how Judas saw Jesus? Did he see Jesus as his servant, rather than seeing himself as Jesus servant? Did he see Jesus as one who would serve his purposes, and, when Jesus failed to serve Judas' purposes, he decided to sell him out for the going price of a servant?

Again, we just don't know.

Throughout history, we have always reserved our harshest judgment for those who commit some act of betrayal or treason, and rightfully so. Betrayal is a sin against trust ... somebody we trusted, who got close enough to kiss us, has turned against us. I can't tell you how many times over my years in ministry

I've spoken with someone who was just devastated by the betrayal of a friend, a spouse, a family member, a church leader ... a trusted person; one who was supposed to be on your side, one who knows you intimately and thus knows better than anyone else how to hurt you or manipulate you. That sort of betrayal hurts like no other hurt. Betrayal shatters the fragile bonds that hold us together ... and when we lose our ability to live together, we lose something of our ability to be truly human, for we are created to be communal creatures. Without that community, we can and often do become ... bestial. Betrayal can destroy a business, a marriage, a family, a church, a community. Betrayal is always devastating; that's why we have always been hard on Judas and all his imitators.

One reason we are also hard on betrayers may be that we fear the tendency in ourselves. We're afraid of the dark possibility that we, too, may betray the things we believe or the people we love. We don't know how it could happen, or even why, anymore than we know why Judas betrayed Jesus, but deep down I think we all fear the possibility that we, too, may do something in our weaker moments to betray and/or hurt the people who are most important to us. We don't want to betray our loved ones, but sometimes even our well-intentioned efforts can do just that. So, when Jesus said one of the Twelve would betray him, the anxiety within all of their souls probably rushed to the surface as one by one they said, "Surely not I, Lord?" They knew what they were capable of, and Jesus' words rattled them.

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One of the more disturbing messages of this night is that every disciple has the capacity to betray Jesus. Sooner or later, every disciple may find s/he doesn't have what it takes to be always faithful. Will we betray Him in the workplace when it will cost too much to think or behave like a Christian? Will we betray Him in our homes when in a fit of temper or passion we hurt those who love, those who trust and depend on us? Will we betray Him in the sacred commitments we make that we simply do not, will not or cannot keep? In Jesus' last hours none of the disciples was a model of faithfulness. Peter denied being a disciple three times. After the crucifixion was over, none of the remaining eleven even attended to Jesus' body. At a time when trustworthiness and faithfulness could have endangered them, all the disciples failed. In a way, all of the disciples betrayed him ... Judas' betrayal was simply the more overt.

One insightful commentator wrote, *"Judas was bad enough to do this deed of infamy, and good enough to be unable to bear the burden of his guilt."* Matthew 27:3 tells us when Judas realized the gravity of his actions, he was seized with remorse; the RSV more accurately translates the original Greek as "he *repented*." But note ... even repentance is not enough. It's not enough to just "be sorry." As we talked about a few Sundays ago, to repent means to turn, and what is most important is *where* we turn, to *Whom* we turn. Judas turned to the chief priests. He turned to those who despised him; he went back to them to return the money. *"I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood,"* he cried out. But they showed him no mercy. *"What is that to us?"* they replied. *"That's your responsibility."* And they may well have added, *"You made your bed; now lie in it."*

By contrast, Peter and the other disciples lived with the pain of their betrayal until they encountered the risen Savior ... and they turned to Him. They turned to the only One who could offer the grace of God; the only One Who could effectively offer forgiveness. In the gospel according to Judas there is no grace; there is just sin and the desperate effort to somehow make things right on our own. In the gospel according to Jesus, there is always grace ... grace that can create a new beginning to our lives. All we have to do is turn in the right direction, to the right Person ... all we have to do is turn to the LORD Jesus Christ.

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It was also the night Judas died. To us in the West, Jesus died the next day. However, the way the Jews measured the day ... sundown to sundown ... Judas and Jesus died on the **same** day. One died as a tragic suicide, the other as a forgiving sacrifice. Judas' story is the tragic story of fragrant devotion turning into flagrant betrayal. While tragic, the grim reality is that this story of betrayal to some degree or another is the story of just about every disciple of Jesus Christ at some time or another. But perhaps the greatest tragedy was that Judas was not at the cross to hear Jesus say, "Father, forgive ..."

In the gospel of Jesus, there is always grace ... grace that can create a new beginning and a fresh start to our lives. All we have to do is turn ... or, re-turn ... to Him and acknowledge him not as just a good Rabbi, but as our Lord ... and determine to live our lives accordingly.