

Sermon: Journey to the Cross IV: Jesus and Judas

Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting of the last supper of our Lord is a study in expression. The scene that he depicts is that moment when Jesus announces his impending betrayal. The disciples look at one another with great shock, all, that is, except JUDAS, who refuses to look Jesus in the face and clutches his money to his breast.

By depicting Judas in this way da Vinci captures for us in painting what the Apostle John writes in his Gospel: "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed." The twelfth apostle is the focus of our sermon today as we continue to Journey towards the Cross. As Jesus announces to the twelve that his betrayer is among them why did Judas refuse to look at Jesus and why was he set on carrying out his nefarious plot? It seems that Judas' greatest downfall was the inability to see himself as a sinner needing to receive God's forgiveness. Without that sense of forgiveness as the grace we most need from Jesus life holds little joy and the future is hopeless. Even after this moment of disclosure when Jesus says he will be betrayed he dips a morsel of bread into the cup of wine and passes it to Judas as a sign of close friendship, Judas cannot receive Jesus' grace. Someone once said that the person who knows himself or herself to be a sinner and does not know Jesus' forgiveness is like an overweight person who fears stepping on a scale.

Why did Judas not receive Jesus' forgiveness and instead betrayed him and then ended his life by suicide? As we read the Gospel accounts carefully it appears that Judas misunderstood Jesus and missed the whole point of who Jesus was and what He was trying to do.

In Mark 14:10-11 we read "Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him." This last comment is very significant. Judas looked for an opportunity to betray Jesus. Not only was he looking for the right time, but he was looking for an event or something Jesus said that would convince him not to follow Jesus any longer. When Jesus at the Last Supper makes it abundantly clear that he will die on the Cross, now the opportunity Judas has been looking for arrives. He would not follow one whose life would end in crucifixion. This isn't the way God's Messiah should act. John's Gospel tells us that it was while they were eating the Last Supper, after Jesus

hands Judas a morsel of bread that Satan enters into Judas. This is another way of saying that now Judas had decided in his heart that he would reject Jesus and the kingdom he stood for. At that moment when Jesus extends his grace to Judas, the apostle rejects this gift and chooses instead to side with the prince of darkness. From this time on Judas becomes Satan's and his evil deeds are the outward expression of the spiritual force that now controls his life.

We could say that Mark 14:10-11 describes Judas' motive. Then in 14:43-50 we see Judas acting on his motive. It is worth noting that in the passage where the betrayal is described we have these words: "Judas, one of the twelve arrived: and with him was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes and the elders." Do you see what is happening here? Although Judas is still described as one of the twelve, as part of the community being shaped by Jesus' life and witness, he has transferred his allegiance over to another community. In the NRSV this community is referred to as a crowd. In another translation it is vividly described as a band of ruffians. Funk and Wagnalls dictionary defines a ruffian as "a lawless, brutal, cruel fellow one ready for or given to riotous, cruel or murderous deeds.

What has happened here is that Judas chooses the company he will keep based on who he sees Jesus to be. Because he has rejected Jesus rather than being part of the community of grace he joins a community of lawless men and will end up being disgraced. We have to go over to Matthew's gospel to get this detail, for Mark omits it. In Matthew 27:3 we read When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵ Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself." You will notice that there is no grace, no concern for Judas in the response of the chief priests and elders. Because he thinks he cannot be forgiven, that gift Judas most needs, he kills himself.

Judas stands in such stark contrast to Mary, whose anointing of Jesus we had looked at last week. Where a woman's encounter with Jesus leads to an act of extravagant generosity because she received Jesus' grace and forgiveness, Judas' encounter with Jesus hardens him because Judas missed the message, the mandate and the moment. Let's look at each of these in turn.

JUDAS MISSED THE MESSAGE

And sometimes so do we.

On December 17, 1903 Orville and Wilbur Wright kept their hand-built airplane up in the air for 59 seconds. It was an incredible accomplishment. Then they sent a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio which read:

"FIRST SUSTAINED FLIGHT TODAY 59 SECONDS. HOPE TO BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS."

The excited sister took the incredible news to the local newspaper editor. The next morning to her shock and dismay, the headline read in bold letters:

"POPULAR LOCAL BICYCLE MERCHANTS TO BE HOME FOR HOLIDAYS"

Incredible news... one of the biggest news stories in all of history... and it passed Dayton by that day because the editor had missed the message. How often that happens. We miss the message. Jesus came preaching love, not force; forgiveness, not vengeance; mercy, not cruelty; kindness, not hatred... and we, like Judas, are still missing His message. We still believe in power and force. We still have too much vengeance and hostility in our lives. And we excuse ourselves by saying... He didn't really mean it." Well, He showed us He meant it on a cross! So if we don't want to be a traitor to Christ, then we dare not, we must not... miss His message of love. Judas heard Jesus when He spoke of the Kingdom and the power and the glory. He evidently was not listening as carefully when Jesus said the road to the Kingdom of God is by way of a cross. He missed the message.

The writer to the Hebrews understood just how important the message is. These are his words in chapter 2: "It's crucial we keep a firm grip on what we have heard so that we don't drift off. If the old message delivered by the angels was valid and nobody got away with anything, do you think we can risk neglecting this latest message, this magnificent salvation?"

Although he doesn't outright answer the questions there is an implied "no" in his question. Like the writer says we need to keep a firm grip on the message Jesus preached, for if we do not then like Judas we will drift off like a boat freed from its moorings with no one at the helm. However, conversely when we know the message and are applying it to our lives then there is meaning and purpose because our lives are under the authority of Jesus and we are part of the fellowship of grace.

JUDAS MISSED THE MANDATE

And sometimes so do we.

Of course the word mandate means command. The mandate of Jesus was to follow. The command of Jesus was to trust, to be obedient, to be faithful. This was where Judas slipped up, perhaps. Maybe he was trying to assure "success". Maybe he was trying to make Jesus do it his way. He tried to use Jesus. He tried to manipulate Jesus. He tried to play God... and make it all come out his way.

Don't we still do that? Don't we still try to manipulate God and use Him? Think of your prayer life... what do you say in your prayers? God do this. God do that. God bless me. God fix my problem. God give to me. God work this out for me just like this.

We are called to be faithful, not to be successful. We are called to serve God and to be obedient to God. We are called to do the best we know and to trust God to bring it out right. But Judas missed the message and he missed the mandate.

St. Paul grasped the mandate of Jesus and in these words from Romans describes it so clearly²⁸ We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." The mandate of the Gospel, the purpose of the Father is that we be conformed to the image of Jesus." It is this conformity that we see in Mary's extravagance but is so lacking in Judas because he missed the mandate.

JUDAS MISSED HIS MOMENT

Sometimes so do we. Actually Judas missed two key moments, which could have changed his life. If he had seized either one of them, then today his name would be an honored one rather than one of shame.

The first came in the Upper Room. Jesus offered bread to Judas. That was a very significant moment. It was the symbol of forgiveness.

By Oriental custom, to dip a morsel of bread or meat into the dish and hand it to

someone at the table was a token of deep personal friendship. Jesus was offering to Judas His love, his friendship... reconciliation...a way out of the deception... forgiveness. In effect, He is saying, "Judas, I know, and I still love you. It's not too late. You don't have to go through with this." The crowning blow was that even as Jesus offers this symbol of love and friendship, Judas makes his final resolve to betray... Jesus sees it in his eyes. "What you must do, do quickly."

He could have been forgiven! All the disciples ran out! And they were all forgiven. Judas could have been forgiven, too. He could have made a comeback. The big difference between Simon Peter and Judas is here. Peter failed too, but he recovered. He bounced back but Judas thought his failure was final and he took his own life.

The unseized moments of life ... are the stuff tragedy is made of... the unseized moment of helping someone in need, of listening, of caring, of expressing appreciation, of giving or accepting forgiveness, of commitment.

Judas missed his moment and sometimes so do we.

Malcolm Muggeridge once wrote, "Both Mother Teresa and I visited Calcutta many years ago. We both saw the wretched people there and shivered. She stayed and did something about it! I went home and did nothing!"

In life's great moments, what do you do? Judas missed the message, the mandate, and the moment, and that was his undoing. It could be our undoing too. Because, you see, while it's O.K. to grapple with this question, "Why did Judas betray?" the real question for us today is...

"Why do we?"