

Judas the Villain?

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

Tandy Gilliland Taylor

March 7, 2021

Triune Mercy Center

Our sermon series during this season of Lent is entitled *“Were You There?: Finding Ourselves at the Foot of the Cross”*. Each week we will focus on a different character who was part of the painful and yet redemptive drama of Jesus’ final days; we will ponder together about how we might see ourselves in each of these characters. Judas is our character for today.

Our first text this morning is Matthew 26: 14-16: “Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, ‘What will you give me if I betray Jesus to you?’ They paid Judas thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.”

For 2000 years, Judas has been condemned and reviled for betraying Jesus. He has been considered the “worst of the worst”. For centuries, we have heaped scorn and condemnation and contempt upon Judas for his despicable act.

And yet, there’s more to Judas than we usually think. We tend to be familiar with only part of Judas’ story. Our second text this morning, Matthew 27: 3-5, tells us this: “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. He said, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But they said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.”

This text tells us that Judas comes to his senses. He wakes up and realizes what he has done in betraying his Lord and his friend. He realizes that he is a traitor. He is very well aware of how shocking and contemptible and evil his actions were.

He knows his betrayal is even more hideous because it was done with a kiss, the universal symbol of love and devotion and loyalty.

He knows his betrayal is even more despicable because it was done in exchange for money; he set it all up to profit personally from this evil deed.

And he knows that his betrayal is even more repulsive because it was planned, it was premeditated.

But in this text that we rarely hear about, Judas realizes that there is something he can do about it. It’s not easy, but he does it anyway. He goes back to the chief priests and the elders and he confesses his evil deed by saying, “I have betrayed innocent blood. I have sinned.” In

doing this, he faces his own sinfulness honestly and courageously. He declares publicly that Jesus is in fact innocent, and in doing this, he puts his own life at risk.

The religious leaders say to him, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." In other words, "We don't care that he is innocent. We're not going to intervene in the chain of events now. You can try to fix it if you want to, but you're on your own, buddy."

But Judas cannot make everything right again; he cannot stop the chain of events that his actions have triggered. He is helpless to escape his own guilt.

Can we see ourselves in Judas? Could it be that we are more like Judas than we've ever realized? How many of us have done something that we deeply regret and cannot fix, even after apologizing? It seems to me that sometimes, we're caught in the same predicament, where there is nothing we can say or do to reverse the chain of events we've set in motion. We desperately wish we could re-wind the clock, but we can't. We can't rectify the situation; we can't reverse our words and actions that have been hurtful. We can feel trapped by words we've spoken that have deeply wounded a spouse or a friend, a child or a parent. We can feel caught in the nightmare of addiction that so often includes deception and betrayal of those we love the most. We can see no way out after betraying a friendship or a marriage. We can't get away from our tendency to do and say those things that we don't want to do or say. And how many of us have heaped scorn upon ourselves?

Judas feels trapped by his own actions; he sees no way out. He decides he can't possibly live with himself after doing such a hideous, despicable thing. And so, he hangs himself.

Judas was the only disciple to take his own life. Yet Judas was not the only disciple to disappoint Jesus. All the disciples abandoned Jesus in his hour of need; all of them hid from the authorities in order to save their own skin.

Peter, in particular, denies Jesus. When asked if he knows Jesus, Peter says no three times, the last time even swearing and cursing emphatically. He is afraid, afraid of the repercussions of being associated with Jesus: might he be beaten, tortured, or even killed? Famously, when the cock crows, Peter realizes that his words have betrayed his friendship and devotion to Jesus. He weeps bitterly, full of remorse. Peter slinks away from the scene of his denial, and hides from the authorities. Interestingly, unlike Judas, Peter makes no effort to make amends. Peter does not even try to make things right. Peter does not go to the authorities to tell the truth, like Judas did. Peter was not willing to "go public" with a declaration of the truth. Peter was a coward twice: once with the denial, and a second time, with failing to admit his sin.

Judas and Peter both do deplorable things. Yet they respond very differently. Judas confesses publicly, but goes out and hangs himself, and has been known through the centuries as the

personification of evil. Peter, on the other hand, does not confess publicly, but becomes a powerful leader in the early church, and has been known through the centuries as “Saint Peter.” What’s the difference?

When Judas realizes he can’t reverse the tidal wave of events his actions have unleashed, even by recanting, he condemns himself. He can’t imagine that Jesus could or would forgive him for his act of betrayal. He cuts himself off from the healing power of God’s grace, and so he dies, stigmatized by his own heart as a betrayer.

Peter, on the other hand, even in the midst of his deep remorse and self-condemnation, somehow must have been able to remember Jesus’ message of forgiveness and grace, and the transformation Jesus offers to even the worst of sinners. Somehow, Peter is able to come to terms with his own sin, offering it to God for forgiveness, offering himself to God for transformation.

I believe that the forgiveness and grace and transformation that Peter experienced was also available to Judas. But he couldn’t forgive himself; he couldn’t accept God’s gift of forgiveness.

It seems to me that we all have things that we have difficulty forgiving ourselves for. The question is: how do we handle it? Do we, like Judas, cut ourselves off from the flow of God’s forgiveness by refusing to forgive ourselves? We may be more like Judas than we realize, killing ourselves figuratively, experiencing the death of our spirit even while physically alive, by refusing to accept God’s gift of forgiveness.

OR... Can we, like Peter, accept God’s gift of forgiveness? Can we allow God to free us to live lives of gratitude and praise, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be a powerful instrument of God’s love and mercy and grace for the good of the world?

And if we desire and claim God’s forgiveness for ourselves, maybe we can remember it when we think of other people, and their regrettable deeds, and remember that they are not beyond the scope of forgiveness. Bryan Stevenson is a widely acclaimed public interest lawyer who has been a tireless advocate for the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned; he moved to Alabama 30 years ago to work on behalf of those who are wrongly imprisoned, many of whom are on death row. He wrote the memoir Just Mercy that was made into a movie; he founded the Equal Justice Initiative, which has created two new civil rights museums in Alabama, one of which is commonly known as the lynching memorial. He has said and done many amazing things, but one quote that is particularly relevant to this sermon is this:

“I’ve come to understand and to believe that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. I believe that for every person on the planet. I think if somebody tells a lie, they’re not just a liar. I think if somebody takes something that doesn’t belong to them, they’re not just a

thief. I think even if you kill someone, you're not just a killer. And because of that, there's this basic human dignity that must be respected by law."

Each one of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. Judas was more than the worst thing he ever did, and Peter was more than the worst thing he ever did. In this text, we see that even Judas is not pure evil. We see that Judas is a complex person, a mixture of good and bad, a mixture of light and darkness, just like the rest of us. And the biblical story shows us that Peter too is a complex person, a mixture of good and bad, a mixture of light and darkness, just like the rest of us. The Bible tells the stories of others who were more than the worst thing they ever did: Noah was more than just a "drunk"; Moses was more than a murderer; David was more than an adulterer.

Several years ago, I led a memorial service here in this sanctuary for a drug dealer named Shann. He was shot in the back in a drug deal gone bad. Only 9 months before his death, he had been released from prison, after serving a sentence of 21 years and 9 months. He had entered prison at age 23. In planning the service, I spoke with his mother, who said that he had been a good child; he had never disrespected her. He loved to dance and to rap; he even wrote his own rap songs. He loved hanging out with his many friends. He was close to his mother's sister, who had helped raise him. But he went astray as he grew older; he began making bad choices which then snowballed.

During the service that day, I read the powerful words of Romans 8 written by St. Paul, who by the way, had persecuted Christians: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That day, I took the liberty to re-phrase St. Paul for Shann: "I am convinced that neither heartache nor drug dealing nor a bad attitude nor imprisonment nor death, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That day, we celebrated God's love for Shann, a love that never waned, never wavered, never faltered, regardless of the circumstances of his life, despite his poor choices. God's love for Shann, and for each one of us, is constant, faithful, dependable, unshakable. None of us can earn this kind of love, none of us is good enough to deserve it, not even St. Peter! But God gives it to us anyway. God's gifts of love and forgiveness, mercy and eternal life, are gifts of grace, grace we claimed that day for Shann, grace we too are given this day. Thanks be to God!