



SERMONS THAT WORK

Wednesday in Holy Week

Love and Betrayal

[RCL] Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

It is Wednesday of Holy Week, and Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem with waving palm branches and cries of "Hosanna" is a distant memory. Our ears will soon be assaulted by the cries of "Crucify him!" as we journey to the dark day the church has named "good."

If we look back to the beginning of chapter 13, John tells us that Jesus has just performed an act of love by washing his disciples' feet. Our lectionary provides us with a portion of the chapter as the text for this emotionally complex day. As Jesus prepares to share a meal with his closest friends, he declares, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." Jesus was troubled in spirit and the disciples' jaws dropped in astonishment.

Love and betrayal. The two always exist side by side. Authentic love always risks betrayal. Betrayal cuts deep, especially when it comes from a friend with whom we have an intimate relationship. True betrayal is a blade that can only cut into the closest of relationships.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Edmund, who is one of the main characters, betrays his family. When he entered Narnia for the first time, Edmund encountered the White Witch who had secretly laid out an evil plan for him and his siblings. While they sat in her sleigh, the Witch promised to make Edmund king and to provide all the Turkish Delight he can eat, if he would deliver his siblings to her. The offer seemed too good to be true, which should have alerted Edmund to proceed with caution. But he agreed and kept their plan from his brother and sisters. The next time they arrived in Narnia, Edmund slipped away from the group to notify the White Witch. The family was heartbroken when they learned of Edmund's betrayal.

Betrayal always comes as a surprise. If we could see it coming, we would undoubtedly do our best to avoid it. The sting of betrayal hurts because we cannot imagine a friend, family member, or someone we work closely with treating us like that. We tend to believe that only frightful, heartless individuals would be capable of such acts, and that everyone would know and be on guard. Yet that is not always true. Think back to some acts of crimes that have been committed in recent years. In most cases, when the news gets out and neighbors of the perpetrator are interviewed, they are surprised by what they learn. They are often

shocked. You might hear comments like, “He seemed like a really nice, quiet guy who loved his family,” or “I never would have thought she could do something like that.”

Betrayal comes in many forms, and some of us have experienced betrayal in our own lives. Whether it is a friend who breaks our trust, a family member who lets us down, a partner who is unfaithful, or a financial advisor who runs off with our retirement money, the experience of betrayal can shake us to our core. We can feel hurt, angry, and disillusioned by those we thought we could count on. Nothing prepares us for betrayal and the unique pain that it brings. It can take many years to recover from the sting of betrayal.

Only Jesus knew the heart and mind of Judas. Jesus knew who would betray him. It was his friend, the one that had accompanied him as he traveled around the lake teaching, the one who had met his family. In fact, it was the one he trusted to hold the purse that bought them small but nourishing meals – the one who budgeted the money so they could travel to Jerusalem. Yes, Jesus knew who would betray him. When Jesus gives the bread to Judas and tells him, “Do quickly what you are going to do,” the other disciples do not understand. They believe that Jesus has asked Judas to go and buy more supplies for their feast or to give money to the poor. They are too preoccupied with trying to figure out who the betrayer is and trying to make sure that it’s not them. Isn’t that what we would do?

Even in the midst of betrayal, Judas is quietly obedient, leaving immediately, as Jesus instructed. Jesus knows his betrayer and yet kneels to wash his feet and gives him bread to eat. The love Jesus expects from his disciples and from us is modeled in these actions. Showing love even for the one who betrays is the kind of love that binds communities together, even when the shadow of death looms: when betrayal hovers and division threatens the family.

St. John the Evangelist is not simply stating the time of day when he writes, “And it was night.” Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the one that brings light into a world consumed by darkness. Judas chose darkness but the other disciples could not see betrayal coming from him. It is easy for us to imagine ourselves among the other eleven disciples, but could it be that we all have a little Judas in us?

There are times when we might choose darkness either intentionally or unintentionally – times when perhaps our greed or fears drive us to choose the security of wealth or our own self-preservation over trust in Jesus. There are times when our blindness toward others compels us to choose our own personal bread, rather than contributing and sharing in a community feast. And there are times when even our love for Christ is so wrapped up in the darkness of greed and in a mindset of scarcity and selfishness toward others that we once again hand him over to be crucified in our hearts. As painful as it is, we must admit that we are also capable of betraying those we love, and even our savior.

We really don’t know why Judas betrayed his friend and teacher for thirty pieces of silver. Perhaps he had become disillusioned with Jesus, no longer believing that he was the Messiah. Maybe in his own misguided

and controlling way, he was trying to leave an opening for Jesus to prove that he was God. But Jesus was not there to prove anything; Jesus was there to redeem.

When our prayers are not answered as quickly as we might have liked and we do not receive the answer we had hoped for, we sometimes become disillusioned, and our faith is tested. Yet God loves us because of who we are – the betrayer and the beloved – the Judas and the one whom Jesus loved. God loves us with an unlimited, unconditional love. None of us is innocent. All of us are forgiven. God’s unfathomable grace and God’s forgiveness are bigger than our own selfish betrayal. And forgiveness is our chance to begin anew.

Holy Wednesday does not end in betrayal; it ends in love. Jesus knew that his time on earth was limited, and he knew that he would be betrayed. But he did not let this knowledge stop him from carrying out his mission. Instead, he used his betrayal as an opportunity to show us the power of his love, forgiveness, and redemption. And that is indeed Good News.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Marcea Paul.***