



SERMONS THAT WORK

Wednesday in Holy Week

The Paradox of Judas

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

The Paradox of Judas: ultimate betrayer or player in the cosmic drama of salvation?

Today's gospel passage begins, "After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'" Looking back to what Jesus has just said, we hear these words, spoken after he has washed the disciples' feet: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he" (John 13:17-19).

Jesus makes it clear that there is a betrayer among the inner circle of disciples, and that the betrayal was prophesied. He quotes Psalm 41, verse 9: "Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me." To increase the dramatic irony and tension, Jesus is at the table, sharing bread with his bosom friends: the beloved disciple, Simon Peter, and the others. To whom could Jesus be referring? The disciples are mystified. Who could it be? Then Jesus reveals the betrayer by dipping a piece of bread in oil and giving it to Judas Iscariot.

What do we know of Judas? The name Judas Iscariot, son of Simon Iscariot, identifies him, according to many scholars, as a man from the town of Kerioth in Judea. All four gospels include Judas among the twelve of Jesus' closest disciples. He seems to have played a faithful role along with the other eleven whom Jesus sent out with power over unclean spirits and a ministry of preaching and healing. Thus, two basic facts we know about Judas are that Jesus chose him as one of the twelve disciples and that Judas handed Jesus over to the Jerusalem authorities, leading to Jesus' execution.

Was Judas' call to discipleship genuine? It is unlikely that Judas was an imposter from the beginning. In addition to his ministry as a follower of Jesus, he was trusted with the common purse, though John the Evangelist portrays him as a thief. What happened to change Judas into a betrayer? John tells us that Satan entered into him. Does this indicate a change of heart? Why did he betray Jesus? For money? In the Gospel of Matthew, Judas betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. For political reasons? Some scholars suggest that Judas wanted Jesus to be arrested to precipitate an uprising against the

authorities and that he didn't really think Jesus would be killed. Others suggest that Judas wanted Jesus arrested to end a dangerous armed rebellion before it began. Still others suggest that he was disillusioned with Jesus, having hoped he would overthrow Roman rule of Judea. Or perhaps Judas was a faithful follower who betrayed Jesus at Jesus' own request, to fulfill the prophecy of scripture and set the inevitable in motion, as suggested in the apocryphal Gospel of Judas.

The possible reasons for Judas' betrayal follow two interwoven patterns. Either Judas was a greedy, unfaithful man, led into sin by Satan to betray Jesus for money or political reasons, or Judas was a player in the cosmic drama of good and evil, playing an essential role in the salvation of mankind when he handed Jesus over to the authorities. If Jesus' crucifixion was inevitable and necessary for the glory of God and the salvation of mankind, then Judas' action in leading the authorities to Jesus was part of the divine plan.

The distinction rests in some measure on translation. Twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar asserts that the New Testament Greek word *paradidonai*, often translated as "betrayed," actually means "handing over of self." Thus, Paul's description of the institution of the Lord's Supper in his First Letter to the Corinthians, "The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread" (1 Corinthians 11:23), take on a different theological meaning when translated "on the night he was handed over."

In the 1979 Book of Common Prayer alone, we find a variety of translations. Whether we read the traditional translation in the Rite I Eucharistic Prayer: "In the night in which he was betrayed," or the contemporary language of Rite II, Eucharistic Prayer A, "On the night he was handed over," or the language of Eucharistic Prayer D, "When the hour had come for him to be glorified," there is no doubt that the name Judas has become synonymous with betrayal.

Mark's gospel tells us that Judas led the authorities to Jesus as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then betrayed Jesus with a kiss: "Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him" (Mark 14: 44-46).

From beloved, trusted disciple to betrayer, it's clear that love and betrayal go hand in hand. Matthew tells us that Judas immediately felt regret, tried to return the money he had taken in exchange for Jesus' life, and then hanged himself.

We really don't know why Judas turned Jesus over to the authorities. It is possible that Judas, like most of us, acted from complicated and unclear motives. It is possible that Jesus knew this. From the prayer of Jesus: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us, and keep us from

temptation.” The sinner who has succumbed to temptation could be Judas. The sinner who has succumbed to temptation could be any of us.

Considering Judas’ role in the events of Jesus’ last days in Jerusalem, we ponder the nature of betrayal, of sin and redemption. We know that Jesus was troubled in spirit, that the knowledge that one of those he loved would betray him caused him distress. As human beings and as followers of Jesus, we are called to love. We strive not to betray that love. We know that it is never too late to change or repent, that God’s love and capacity for forgiveness are infinite.

We are left with the paradox of Judas. Was he a faithful man who did what had to be done for the salvation of humankind, who made a difficult choice, even though his name would be synonymous with betrayal for millennia? It is possible. Was his decision to hand Jesus over to the authorities an act of politics, in hope of advancing a revolt and overthrowing an unjust power? Perhaps the outcome wasn’t what he hoped it would be. Some of us may be very frustrated with our country’s politics; would we do something as desperate as Judas’ act? Was Judas truly called to ministry with Jesus, and later succumbed to a loss of faith? He could be any one of us. Did Judas hang himself out of regret or remorse? Did he repent before he died? Was he an evil tool of Satan or a flawed, doubting human being? Was Jesus betrayed, or was he handed over? Was Judas’ act a result of one man’s greed and sin, or obedience to God’s purpose for our salvation? There are no easy answers.

Judas as a rebel, a man with a political agenda. Judas as a disciple called to ministry, coping with loss of faith. Judas as an agent in the cosmic drama of God versus Satan. Any of these faces of Judas could be you or I. May we be called to examine our hearts this Holy Week, to discern our motives, to struggle against Satan when the need arises. May we strive to keep faith with those we love.

Let us pray: Christ Jesus, when temptation urges us to abandon you, you pray within us. Even if we forget you, your love remains, and you send your Holy Spirit upon us. And when we come to know our weaknesses, unexpected resources appear within us. Amen.

*This sermon, written by **Susan Butterworth**, originally ran for Wednesday in Holy Week in 2020.*