

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Palm and Passion Sunday- April 2, 2023

Scripture lesson: Matthew 27:3-10

JUDAS, JESUS, AND US

What was Judas thinking in order to do what he did? From a close study of the overall gospel portrait of him, it seems that he likely considered himself smarter and more significant than the others of Jesus' specially chosen Twelve. We can plausibly picture him as deliberately keeping his distance from the rest, analyzing everything from various angles, and reluctant to take Jesus, anyone, or anything else at face value. He's slightly to the side as he follows Jesus, as if to say, "Look, I have other options. I'm with this fellow for now because he draws a good crowd. But he might not be the best way for Israel to get what I know that Israel wants and needs. So, I'll reserve my final judgment for later."

At the same time, though, Judas loves Jesus. He's moved by the parables that Jesus tells and the healings that he does. He's inspired by the journey that they're making together to Jerusalem, and he can't deny that in this man he's received glimpses of God's Kingdom coming upon earth as it is in heaven.

And yet, he's almost embarrassed by his love. He's red-faced to admit that a man of his intelligence might secretly adore Jesus just as much as those poor and common folk do. He has to work hard to keep foremost in his mind the much greater end to which he's committed and to which he believes that Jesus may or may not be the best means.

We can sense his frustration building as Jesus repeatedly passes up opportunities to seize power. His breaking point seems to come at Simon's house in Bethany when Jesus allows a woman's deep devotion to him to be wasted. Judas feels that it's wasted because she pours out costly perfume in a symbolic preparation of Jesus' body for burial. Judas believes that such passionate devotion should be harnessed instead to a popular movement that's dedicated to *overthrowing the Romans*. To him, the use of costly perfume in symbolic burial rites is a load of pious nonsense, especially when there's so much Roman injustice to undo and so many hungry mouths to feed.

As time goes on, Judas becomes increasingly impatient with Jesus' leadership as well as jealous of his charisma. Eventually he is infuriated that Jesus so often seems to prefer beautiful gestures to substantive actions. Finally, after completely losing his patience, he resorts to a clumsy provocation. He tells Jesus in effect, "If you're not going to do what I know is best for you and for Israel then I'll force you into a situation where you'll have no other choice."

So, he leads the chief priests' henchmen into the Garden of Gethsemane. With his famous kiss, he contrives to combine what he believes are Israel's two most powerful forces- namely, the chief priests of the Temple and this extraordinary rabbi from Nazareth. Judas thinks that once they're actually together they'll finally realize that they can be an unstoppable force against the Romans. But instead, the chief priests hand Jesus over to the Romans who will kill him, and Judas is deva-stated.

All he has left now after all of his scheming to use Jesus to get rid of the Romans is those thirty pieces of silver. He goes back to the chief priests and says, "It wasn't supposed to turn out like this. I was supposed to be the hero for bringing the two of you together against the Romans."

But they laugh at him, saying, "You thought that Jesus could be your pawn, but it turns out that you were ours." Everything that Judas has stood for and worked towards is now exposed to him as futile and cruel. Unable to bear that harsh truth, he goes out and hangs himself.

What do we think of Judas today? It's tempting to see him as uniquely evil since that makes it easier for us to believe that we would *never* do what he did. Yet if we look closely at him, I think that we can see a lot in him that is like us. How so?

Well, to begin- there are many ways to put our lives into the hands of other people. When we board a plane, we put our life into the pilot's hands. When we step into a friend's car, we put our life into our friend's hands. When we lie down on an operating table, we put our life into the surgeon's hands. When I tell someone "I love you," I put my heart into my loved one's hands.

BUT- what is it like to be on the other side of that with the lives of other people in *our* hands? I think that half the time we crave this kind of responsibility and half of the time we try to pretend that we never have it. The idea of holding some-one else's life or destiny in our hands- a baby perhaps, or a person we desire who returns our passion, or a person in authority who recognizes our talent and gives us power- that can be a major rush. It can make us feel like we *really* matter, which is a big deal.

But then we suddenly discover that we're not so sure what to do with this power once that we have it. We wanted it, but how do we live with it? We love the attention and the sense of significance that it brings- at least at first- yet how do we handle it now that we are in the spotlight?

Maybe we'd best be careful what we hope for because we might get it. Judas wanted to "make a difference", not only to Israel's destiny but to that of all human-kind- which he did. But with Jesus' heart in his hands, he really didn't know what to do with it. And once he realized that he had gone wildly wrong with it, he went back to the chief priests to beg for another chance.

When they refused him, he felt that he had only one thing left that he could control- namely, his own end. Determined to make a big splash despite the awful wrong that he had done, he decided that he alone would choose what his death would be like. He went out and hanged himself.

That's how betrayal happens. When we, like Judas, don't believe that our lives matter ultimately *in God*, we go out looking for ways to *make* them matter. One of the most common ways is by trying to draw other people into our net- one, a few, or maybe a great many.

At first, we probably just want them to have a good opinion of us, but before long we discover that we want much more. We realize that we chafe under not being able to fully control our own lives, so we try to compensate by controlling the lives of other people- emotionally, physically, professionally, subtly, clumsily, with manipulation or coercion, in public or in private, with charm or by force- whatever it takes.

Yet the moment that people realize they have only been a pawn in our efforts to make ourselves feel more worthy and secure, when they realize that our true commitment has always been above all to ourselves and not to them, when they realize how much they've put

their lives into our hands without our knowing what to do with them- that's when they see us for what we are and feel betrayed.

Adultery is a betrayal because it shows that I put more stock in a misguided idea of my own happiness than I do in the promises of my marriage. Breaking a confidence is a betrayal because it shows that I don't really value what someone else shares with me unless I can use it to amuse or impress somebody else. Judas's kiss is an enormous betrayal because his intimate gesture hides the fact that he regards friendship with God as a mere means to something else that he thinks is more important. For whatever reason, he cannot see or accept the truth that friendship with God is *truly* the most important thing of all, and he loses it by blindly chasing after something else.

But Jesus shows us a different way. He doesn't try to reel other people into his power. Instead, he gives his life into their hands. He loves his disciples, including Judas, and in doing so he gives power to them over him. It's power that's given to the point of possible betrayal even unto death- which is what Judas does.

Then on the cross, Jesus literally gives his whole life away. He submits willingly to a wickedly unjust crucifixion and in doing so he gives his supreme witness against all of our security systems, control-freakishness, manipulations, and coercions. He doesn't seize power over others. He gives his life into their hands.

For his part, Judas was never able to understand that. The moment that he realized he had become a pawn in someone else's game, he went out and killed himself. Being under the control of other people, especially those that he learned were empty and cruel, was to him the ultimate disaster.

But for Jesus, life is never a game of control, manipulation, or coercion. He has no other purpose than to make, to restore, and to maintain true friendship. He knows that real friendship can never be manipulated, coerced, or used as a means to something else that's supposedly more important. Genuine friendship *is* what matters to God, above all and forever.

Jesus is God becoming our friend. Jesus is God at work to restore the whole creation to friendship with God. None of us are ever pawns on a divine chess-board. Instead, we're the friends that God wants to make.

As our friend, God puts God's life into our hands. This means that we too can betray God, which we often do. We betray God when, like Judas, we treat God as a means to something else that we think is more important. And we betray God when we try to make ourselves feel more worthy and secure by controlling other people.

Yet the good news comes to us again and again and again. In Jesus Christ, we're shown that *God never betrays us*. Let's take that in again- *God never betrays us*. Hallelujah, hallelujah.

In closing, it's also worth recognizing that when Judas returns his thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests, St. Matthew also paints an ironic scene in which those men who earlier had not hesitated to shed innocent blood now suddenly become queasy about hanging onto the blood money that they had paid. They use it instead to buy "a potter's field" in which they will bury foreigners.

"A potter's field"- that phrase gives us two echoes from the prophet Jeremiah that Matthew wants us to hear. First, it recalls the field that Jeremiah bought just before the Assyrians invaded Jerusalem back in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (Jeremiah 32). That purchase was Jeremiah's seemingly crazy gesture of prophetic confidence that after a time in exile the Jewish people

would return to their homeland- which they did. Referring to the potter's field, Matthew gives us his own crazy intima-tion of another return from exile. He wants us to know that the crucified Jesus will indeed return. After a time of exile in the tomb, Jesus will come back to us, risen from the dead.

Secondly, the "potter's field" image brings to mind Jeremiah's potter. In Jeremiah, chapter 18, we learn that his clay pot broke in his hands, but that he fashioned a new one from out of the remaining shards. Likewise, in Matthew's gospel we see that the clay of Jesus' life will soon also break in human hands, but that God will refashion him from that same clay into life that is resurrected. God's story in Jesus Christ will keep on keeping on.

Amazingly, it is Judas the betrayer who can help us see into the heart of this. Judas could never have betrayed Jesus if Jesus hadn't first befriended him, if Jesus hadn't first given power over his life into Judas's hands. But that is exactly what Jesus did with Judas then and that's exactly what God does with us now.

In the story of God that comes to a climax during this Holy Week and on Easter Sunday, we see that even when we betray God and even when we crucify God, God still finds a way to come back to us. God still finds a way to befriend us and to give God's own life into our hands.

That is the great, good news which Judas the betrayer never could understand. But thank God it is the great, good news that the betrayer in each of us can take to heart now. Amen.