

Understanding Judas  
Luke 6:13 – 16; John 12:1 – 8;  
Matthew 26:14 – 16, 20 – 25, 36, 47 – 50, 27:3 – 5  
Sunday, May 5, 2019

Back on our Maundy Thursday service, as we were talking about the Last Supper and Jesus' betrayal and arrest and death, I found myself focusing on Judas. And so I wanted to come back after Easter and spend a little time *talking* about Judas, because Judas isn't someone that we talk about a whole lot. There are a lot of *questions* surrounding Judas. Who *was* he? (We don't know a whole lot about him.) *Why* did he betray Jesus? Did he have a *choice* in it, or was his betrayal foreordained, because Jesus seems to be pretty clear ahead of time that this is going to happen? And if his betrayal *was* foreordained, if he *didn't* have a choice in the matter, then would God *punish* him for something he didn't have a choice in doing?

So I wanted to spend a little time thinking about Judas this morning, because I think the story of Judas *speaks deeply* to our experience of life and faith.

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Let's start with his name. He is identified in scripture as Judas Iscariot. What is that *Iscariot* about? One theory is that it has to do with where he is from. That *Iscariot* is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew word *Is-Qriyot*, which means "man from Kerioth." Kerioth is a town in the southern part of Israel. Not a whole lot else to it. Back then, people were sometimes identified by the town they came from (like Jesus of Nazareth).

But there is another theory about Judas, that *Iscariot* refers to a group called the *Sicarii*, which means "dagger men." The *Sicarii* were an extremist group, whose goal was to kick the Romans out of Israel. In Jesus' time Israel was being occupied and oppressed by the Roman Empire. There were a lot of different groups that wanted to force the Romans *out* of Israel (by killing

them, if they had to), to return the kingdom of Israel back to the Jewish people. There was one group called the Zealots, and then there was this group, the *Sicarii*.

So the thinking is that Judas might have been a part of this extremist group. If that is the case, then it could really help us understand *why* he betrayed Jesus. Because when groups like the *Sicarii* and the Zealots thought about the Messiah, they thought of him as the one who was going to raise up an army to kick the Romans out and restore the kingdom of Israel back to the Jewish people. The disciples talk about Jesus as “the one who would redeem Israel,” and they are always asking him, “Lord, is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Their expectation was that Jesus was going to be an actual *king* who sat on a throne and defeated the Romans.

So on Palm Sunday, when Jesus is processing into Jerusalem and people are laying their cloaks down on the road in front of him and waving palm branches, reenacting the enthronement of a king as it was done in the Old Testament, Judas *sees* that and has to be thinking, “This is it! This is what I’ve been *waiting* for. He’s finally going to *do it!* He’s going to start an uprising, a rebellion to defeat the Romans and give us our nation back.” This was everything that Judas had been *waiting* for. And then it *didn’t happen*.

Jesus *wasn’t* the kind of king that Judas expected him to be. He didn’t *do* what Judas *hoped* he would do. Judas had to feel *disillusioned*. I would imagine that, in some ways, Judas felt *betrayed*. He thought Jesus was *on his side*, a part of *his team*. He thought Jesus stood for the same things *he* did. And then to find out that he *didn’t*? Can you imagine how that might have *felt* to Judas?

Have you ever had *expectations* of someone that they didn't *deliver* on? Have you ever thought that someone was on your side, that they stood for the same things *you* do, that they were a part of your team and then found out that they *weren't*?

The thing about the *Sicarii*, this extremist group that Judas is thought to have been a part of, is that they wanted to kick the Romans out as part of a larger *social revolution*. *Zealots* wanted to get rid of the Romans for more religious reasons, but the *Sicarii* wanted to take that a step further and completely reorder society, and a part of that reordering had to do with divisions between the *rich* and the *poor*. They wanted to level things out (more justice and fair economic practices), and the Romans were standing in the way of that. So was Judas part of a group whose chief purpose was to help the poor and bring about justice for people being oppressed?

There's this time right before Jesus is killed when Mary anoints Jesus by pouring a jar of expensive perfume on his feet. And *Judas* gets upset when he sees this and says, "Lord, why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Is Judas upset because he thinks Jesus is betraying his mission to bring about a social revolution and help the poor? And in the gospels, right after this story is told, the very next thing it says is that "Judas went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?'" Because Jesus isn't who he *expected* him to be. He isn't *doing* what he expected him to *do*. And if *he's* not going to do it, Judas might as well make a little money off him that he can use to help the poor and further the cause.

Without saying that he was *right*, can you at least begin to understand where Judas was *coming from*? What his *motivations* might have been? Judas felt that he had been betrayed, so he betrayed in return. I think the question here is, can we find *empathy* for *Judas*? Because when

we can find empathy for *Judas*, it opens up a whole lot of room in our lives to find empathy for *others*.

In writing this sermon, I struggled with the title. At first, I wanted to title it *Resurrecting Judas*. That sounded good. But that's not something that *we* can do in a sermon. Only *Jesus* can resurrect someone and give them new life. Then I thought about *Redeeming Judas*. But again, we can't redeem Judas. Only Jesus can do that. What *we* can do is *understand* Judas; understand who he was, what he did, and why he did it. And that's all we can do with *anyone*. We can't *redeem* them or *save* them or *fix* them. Only Jesus can do that. But we can seek to *know* them and *understand* them and maybe, through that, find a way to *love* them.

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We have *all* felt betrayed at some point in our lives. A friend or family member, a spouse, a parent, a child, a coworker, a church member; someone we trusted; someone we thought was on our side; and then they *did something* to *break* that trust. "You told me it was going to be *this* way, but then you did this thing that showed me something *completely different*, and now I don't know if I can *ever* trust you again."

We have all felt betrayed, *and we have all betrayed*. We might have betrayed other people. We might have betrayed *God*, betrayed our *faith* in God; like we *say* one thing, *profess to believe* one thing, and then *do something* that shows the exact opposite. We might have even betrayed *ourselves*, our own values or ideals. It's like Paul says in Romans, "I do not understand my own actions. I *want* to do what is right, but I *can't*. Instead I do the very thing that I *hate*." It's this feeling that I think we have *all* felt of, "*This* is the way that I want to be, the way I want to live and order my life, but then I *do this thing* that goes against everything I stand for, and I *just can't help it*."

I think the reason that we can identify with Judas is because we have all betrayed and *felt* betrayed. And maybe the reason that we never *talk* about Judas is because we're not really talking about Judas. We're talking about *ourselves*.

When we go through these experiences of betrayal, whether we have *been* betrayed or whether *we* are the ones *doing* the betraying, there is this feeling that comes with it like a part of us is *dying*. Judas was so wracked with guilt after he realized what he had done that he takes his own life. He has betrayed an innocent man, he has betrayed his *friend*, and he is so overwhelmed by the *shame* of what he has done. The other disciples aren't going to take him back after this. They won't ever be able to trust him again after what he has done. He sees no hope, no possibility of forgiveness. He completely despairs, and the only way out of this that he can see is to kill himself.

But there's this one little line in Judas' story that gets missed; that we don't ever talk about. It says that when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, *he repented* and *brought back* the thirty pieces of silver he had received for betraying him. *Judas repented*. To *repent* doesn't just mean that you feel guilty or bad about what you have done. To *repent* literally means, "to turn." It's about changing your actions, reorienting your life. You *were* going *this* way, but now you are going *this* way. It's about changing the way that you live. Judas didn't just feel guilty. He didn't just feel *remorse* over what he had done. He *repented*. He tried to *turn things around*. He tried to *change*.

Because some part of him must have seen some glimmer of hope, some way to *fix* this mess that he created, some *possibility*, however small, of *forgiveness*.

Paul goes on to say in Romans, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No,” he says, “for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, no rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, or depth, nor *anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Nothing, he says, can separate us from the love of God. God’s love is stronger than our sin. It is stronger than our betrayal. When Christ died, it was to forgive *all* our sin. Not just *some* of our sin. Not just *this one* but, *oh, not that one.* What God shows us in Jesus Christ is that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven.

Which begs the question: *even for Judas?* Is there *forgiveness* for *Judas?* Is there *resurrection* for *Judas?*

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Frederick Buechner is a pastor and author who talks in one of his sermons about what is referred to as “the Harrowing of Hell.” This is the idea that Jesus died on Friday, he was resurrected on Sunday, but on *Saturday*, he descended into hell to rescue all those who had died before the crucifixion. And Buechner imagines this scene where Jesus and Judas meet in death and talk about everything that happened. And it ends with Jesus *embracing* Judas and *kissing* him, like Judas kissed Jesus in the garden when he betrayed him. Jesus counters the kiss of betrayal and death with one of forgiveness and life, and in doing so, he sets Judas free.

And while that’s an imagined scene, I think it points to something very *real*, and that is the *possibility* of forgiveness, for Judas *and for us.* Because when we ask whether *Judas* can be forgiven, what we’re *really* asking is, “Can *I* be forgiven? This person who has betrayed me and hurt me, can I forgive *them?* Can I still be loved after what I have done, and can I love this

person after what *they* have done? Is there *forgiveness* for the *betrayals* in my life? Is there *resurrection* for the *deaths* in my life?"

And I think the answer to those questions is found in Judas. Because do you know what Judas' name *means*? Judas is the *Greek* way of saying his name. In *Hebrew* his name would be *Judah*, which means, "God is praised." Judas' name means, "God is praised." Even in *Judas*, God is praised. Because it is Judas' act of *betrayal* that leads to Christ's act of *salvation*. Even in *betrayal*, God can be praised. Even in *death*, God can be praised. Even in this thing in my life that is *killing me*, God can be praised. Even in *me*, in *you*, in *all of us*, with all the brokenness in our lives, God can be praised.

It comes down to this: if the resurrection is for *anyone*, it's for *Judas*. And if resurrection is possible for *Judas*, resurrection is possible for *anyone*. So the question for *us* is, can we find a way to meet the betrayals in our lives with forgiveness? Because that is how Christ meets us.