

Sunday August 28, 2023
Lesson 13: The Tragedy of Judas
Scripture: John 13:21-30

Context:

Today we conclude our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this final lesson of our final unit, “Heroes and Anti-Heroes,” we consider how God works through all people and all situations, even those of tragedies. Through this focus on heroes and anti-heroes, we consider what it means as God works through the complexity of humanity. Today’s figure is Judas Iscariot, the infamous disciple known as the one who betrayed Jesus. The focus of today’s lesson is to look for God’s help in dealing with the guilt which haunts humans.

The setting for the text today is what is known as the Last Supper. Before our passage today, Jesus washes all his disciples’ feet as an act of love and service. He then invites the disciples to do the same, to go forth and be a servant just as he has served and loved them. The act is tender and holy, setting the tone for the disciples and what their mission will be.

The tone shifts though as Jesus moves from discipleship to something else which will happen. In verse eighteen, Jesus even gives a premonition of what will happen as he speaks of how not everyone will be part of this mission as one of them will “lift his heel against me.” This is a reference to Psalm 41:9, “that the scripture may be fulfilled,” which speaks of the treachery for a friend.¹ From verses twenty-one through thirty, Jesus interprets this for his disciples and the motion is set in place for his betrayal.

Significant to the plotline is the fact Jesus is “troubled in spirit,” echoing his emotions found in the death of Lazarus. When Jesus announces he will be betrayed by one of them, there begets the question “Who will it be?” The disciple whom Jesus loves is nudged by Simon Peter to probe Jesus for the answer.

Jesus answers by saying the traitor will be the one to whom he dips the bread in the dish and tastes it. He turns to Judas and offer him the dish and then it happens as Judas begins to move. The only motivating force for what happens next is “Satan enters into him.” Yet the disciples do not understand as when Jesus tells him to go do what he will do quickly, they assume Judas is going out with the common purse to buy something, as he is the treasurer. The narrative ends with the climax, “and it was night.” As we’ve all seen in literature and life, some of the more nefarious deals and betrayals are made in the dark when no one is looking, or the doors are closed and the lights cannot pervade the space.

What is interesting about the narrative according to John is when Jesus is betrayed in the garden, there is no kiss.² Thus, the readers ponder what motivated Judas and the will of God. We are told nowhere of why Satan’s promptings were attractive to him in his free choice to betray

¹ Gerard Sloyan, “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 170.

² *Ibid*, 171.

his friend; leaving only the speculation of our own betrayals in friendship.³ We ask because we too might ponder why we betray others and why others betray us.

Application

When I was in high school, the English department always had us read a different Shakespeare tragedy every year. I used to wonder why we couldn't move onto some of the Bard's comedies or histories. Those would be much lighter than what we read as *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* all seemed to end the same: death, deception, and chaos. Yet the more I've gone on since my teenage years, I am deeply grateful for a place which invited me to look at literature and plays for explorations of the human heart.

The narrative we read today falls very much in line with a Shakespeare tragedy as it invites us to consider the questions of motivation and what moves people to do what they do. We meet perhaps the most infamous traitor of all time. Judas Iscariot is known as the disciple who betrayed not just his friend; he gave up the Lord of life handing him over to be slandered, beaten, and crucified before the entire world. His name has gone down in history with people saying: "you Judas!" when one is betrayed by someone who they thought loved them.

For centuries, everyone has tried to figure out Judas Iscariot. Even his death has been a mystery. According to Matthew, he felt the guilt of his behavior and went out to hang himself after the council members would not take back the money he was given to betray Jesus.⁴ Yet according to the book of Acts, Judas bought a field, with an ambiguous term for throwing himself on the land and his bowels coming out, indicating this too was the taking of his own life.⁵ The biblical text though never gives an account of him reuniting with the disciples or of what God's role in his life was like past the betrayal.

In recent years, there has been the attempt to give reasons for why Judas did what he did. According to the film and Broadway play "Jesus Christ Superstar," Judas was motivated out of concern for what Jesus could do and how great he could rise; he just needed a little push. Yet the push was too far, and Judas was left without a teacher and friend.

In my own ministry, I have met numerous people who love to talk about Judas. They ask all the questions. Did God forgive him? How was this part of God's plan? What about the gift of free will? And then there is always the conclusion that Judas gets a bad rap, and we should be careful to villainize him as there was also this big bad Roman Empire and the angry mobs. All good points to remind us of how we deal with guilt for the things we do.

The odds are all have been a Judas at some point in our lives. We sat on a SPRC where we said one thing about the pastor and then another to their face. We threw a friend under the bus so we could play innocent. Or maybe we didn't exactly betray anyone; we were just silent as we saw it happen. We are convicted of sins of omission.

Beyond narcissists and psychopaths, I have usually found most people carry some form

³ Ibid.

⁴ Matthew 27: 1-10.

⁵ Acts 1: 18

of guilt with them in these situations, which is a good thing. Guilt is from feelings which arise when we know we have done something wrong. It is a sort of check engine light to remind us there is something not right in our soul.

I have often found God helps us in our guilt through various ways. It might be we need to confess it to someone we trust or love. Or it might be we read scripture and feel assurance of how we are indeed sinners, saved but by the grace of God. And maybe we come to the table at Holy Communion and realize God's grace has come before us again and we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Yet I encourage all of us not to sweep our guilt under the rug. If we have erred against others, may we like Judas, at least seek to right the wrong. There is grace and forgiveness, mercy and healing in the one who loves us. And if anything lingers about Judas and his actions, may we remember some of the final words Jesus uttered upon the cross: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

How have you seen guilt plague your life or the life of others? What portrayals of Judas have resonated with you? Why do you think the character of Judas invites us to consider our own relationships and betrayals? How has God helped you in your own guilt when you have transgressed against the Lord or betrayed others? What spiritual disciplines will you seek when you feel guilty?

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