

1st Sunday in Lent

"I, Judas"

Matthew 26:36-50

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In the annals of history, there isn't a name more dishonorable than that of Judas Iscariot- after all, you certainly don't hear of many parents anxious to name their newborn son "JUDAS," do you? People who love animals won't even assign their DOGS that name! To brand a person a "Judas" is to imply that he or she is a liar and a thief, someone who is treacherous and a betrayer. Whether in love or in friendship, there is no greater heartbreak than to have had your trust or good faith abused or violated by another person- to have been betrayed by a "Judas."

However, as I said in my Ash Wednesday sermon the other evening, no one is ever purely good or purely evil, that every one of us to varying degrees finds him or herself an admixture of BOTH impulses. You might say we all find ourselves on a moral/spiritual continuum located somewhere between Mother Teresa on the one end and Adolph Hitler on the other. Thus, I think it would be a mistake to assume that Judas started out in life as a bad seed, that is, as a thoroughly corrupt person; one lacking any redeeming value. Many scholars believe he first followed Jesus because he sincerely believed him to be the Messiah and, like the rest of the disciples, supposed he would set up a political kingdom. He was no doubt convinced that Jesus was the one man who could excite the masses and lead an uprising large enough to overthrow the yoke of Roman authority. Under his leadership, Israel would become free again- or so he thought. Over time, he grew increasingly disillusioned with Jesus as it became clear that his kingdom was NOT of this world, that he came to establish a SPIRITUAL kingdom- one that would begin in men's hearts. There are a number of scholars who share this opinion.

We don't know why Jesus chose Judas to be one of his disciples in the FIRST place. What makes his betrayal of Christ PARTICULARLY EGREGIOUS is that Judas, LIKE JESUS, was the ONLY Judean in the group- the rest of the disciples being Galileans. Since he and Jesus were both countrymen, you would have expected that a special bond might have been kindled between the two of them. Now it's important to understand the significance of Judas being the only Judean among the group. HISTORICALLY speaking, Judeans and Galileans tended to despise each other. Galilee was a separate region well to the north of Judea and their land was bordered on all sides by the Gentiles whom the Jews considered unrighteous pagans. Over time, many Galileans found themselves influenced by both their customs and their practices. Believing they were the only TRUE Jews, the Judeans developed contempt for the Galileans the same way they did for the Samaritans, thinking of them as culturally and racially inferior. They were considered RELIGIOUSLY inferior AS WELL- for their lax observance of the Mosaic Law's strict standards and their inability to often attend Temple due to the great distance between them. Therefore, it's possible Judas may have reflected a SIMILAR attitude, harboring feelings of superiority towards the OTHER disciples.

What we ARE certain about Judas though was his heart, that he had a preoccupation with money and was stealing from the treasurer's purse which he controlled. Yet, Jesus never took any action to discharge him from that responsibility nor did he ever expose his thievery.

On several occasions he even warned Judas and his followers that one of them would betray him. Jesus, however, had been very patient with Judas, making every effort to show him just how much he loved and cared for him.

This was no more apparent than on the same night our Lord was betrayed by him. During what was to be their last supper together, it was Judas to whom Jesus had given the place of special honor. At one point during the Passover meal, some bitter herbs were placed between two pieces of unleavened bread, dipped into a paste of apples, dates, pomegranates, and nuts (called the sop) and eaten. The host would personally make the sop and hand it to a guest of honor as a gesture of love and respect. By offering the sop to JUDAS, he was honoring him in the presence of all the other disciples. However, Jesus already knows that Judas' heart has been hardened, that nothing he did now could possibly dissuade him from his mission. Therefore, Jesus gives him final permission to carry out his deed by telling him, "Do quickly what you have to do." We are then told that Satan entered him and he got up and mysteriously left the group.

Jesus provided Judas with many opportunities to turn from his ways. He showed him the same degree of love and grace and forgiveness that he offered to all his disciples- but Judas rejected them all. Over time, his heart became increasingly hardened until his conscience could no longer respond to the voice of the Spirit, until he no longer cared for the distinction between right and wrong, until he could no longer experience love or sympathy or pity for anyone else except himself.

This evil in Judas's heart came to full flower with his betrayal of Jesus. He sold his master to the authorities for thirty pieces of silver which, at that time, was the normal value of a slave. But his hypocrisy was no more apparent than in the sign that he gave to the arresting soldiers. Leading the authorities to the garden at Gethsemane where Jesus had often retreated to pray, he approached Jesus with a customary greeting, "Hail, Rabbi!" and then kissed him- alerting the Jews that he was now to be taken. Jesus was not just betrayed by a friend, but with the most INTIMATE EXPRESSION of that friendship- a kiss. This was HYPOCRISY AT ITS WORST!

The scriptures thus paint for us a portrait of a man with great moral weaknesses. But instead of restraining them or repenting of them, Judas FED those weaknesses. He allowed them a place in his heart to take root and grow there until they eventually possessed and controlled him. As the famed evangelist of the last century, Dwight L. Moody, once put it:

"Sow the act, and reap the habit;
Sow the habit and reap the character;
Sow the character, and reap the eternity."

Judas sowed the ACT until his small petty deeds had become habitual; he sowed the HABIT until his character became thoroughly self-serving, motivated only by profit; he sowed the CHARACTER until his conscience was dead and his heart had become like stone. Judas was inwardly dead; he was unable to respond to the continuous offers of love and grace patiently extended by Jesus time and time again. His was the sad story of a man so given over to avarice and greed that it eventually destroyed him and innocent persons around him as well.

One of my favorite biblical figures is King David, my namesake. As a young shepherd boy, he gains the love and devotion of Israel for his bravery and outstanding leadership. Saul, a cowardly king, feels he has lost the affection and respect of his army, his people, and even his own family and he blames David for it. In his jealousy, he tries to kill David at every opportunity though David loves Saul and remains true to him. Scripture says, "And so he (Saul) grew more and more afraid of David and was his enemy for the rest of his life."

When Saul's son, Jonathan, who is also David's best friend, tries to speak to his father-to intercede on David's behalf, to warm his heart, to break him of this obsession, to bring him back to reality, Saul can't hear a thing. His jealousy and pride has become an impregnable shell and he cannot recognize or respond to love or truth of any kind. Like Judas, Saul is inwardly dead- there's nothing human left to build upon. And the result is always the same- as it was for Judas- he inevitably ends in destroying himself and others with him.

Judas's motivation was evidently his avarice and greed where for Saul, it was his jealousy and his pride. What initially began as a small seed in each of their hearts grew and grew until it had become a dominant obsession that controlled them. That seed over time had metastasized into a moral and spiritual cancer that killed their conscience and left them unable to give or receive love or sympathy or pity of any kind. Their whole world now revolved around their own problems, their own wants, their own needs and nobody else's. They had become masters of their own limited universe, unable to recognize the consequences of their own actions. They would not, in fact, they COULD NOT stop until their victims, their families, their friends, and even themselves had been destroyed.

Let's pause for a second to remind ourselves just what Judas's crime consisted of. After all, we're not talking about a Stalin or a Hitler who murdered millions of people in their thirst for power, or a Charlie Manson or Jeffrey Dahmer whose crimes are far too horrible to even recount. Judas was no mass murderer, no rapist, no sexual abuser of children. Sure, he was a hypocrite, a petty thief, a cunning individual who betrayed the trust of a friend, but these are not necessarily crimes- certainly nothing that we ourselves have been guilty of at one time or another in our OWN lives. Did not Peter, the chief apostle, the one who had professed he would never fail Christ, betray him not once but THREE times with his denials; and at Christ's arrest, did not John, the Beloved Disciple, desert him along with the others for fear of his own life. A careful study will reveal how all twelve, in their own way, proved faithless, hypocritical, and self-serving in the hour Christ needed them most.

But what separates the faithlessness of Peter and John and the rest of the disciples from Judas Iscariot was not the DEGREE of their sin but rather their RESPONSE to it. This is a central point and I want to repeat so that you can really hear it: What separated the faithlessness of Peter and John and the rest of the disciples from Judas Iscariot was not the DEGREE of their sin but HOW THEY RESPONDED TO IT AFTERWARDS. In the days following Christ's crucifixion, each of the twelve had their hearts stricken by the Holy Spirit. Their sin had burnt a deep hole in their conscience and, one-by-one, they responded to it by repenting of it. None of them attempted to excuse themselves; not one of them tried to justify their awful betrayal or pretend they were innocent of anything wrong.

Instead, they opened their hearts to the Spirit's correction and sought forgiveness for what they recognized was far MORE than a simple moral lapse but the very betrayal of God HIMSELF. They refused to allow the seed of their treachery to take root and eventually take

over their life. They dealt with their sin quickly and decisively, not giving it a permanent place in their lives. As proof, each would spend the rest of his life wandering the highways and back roads of towns and cities everywhere, enduring persecution, shipwreck, and imprisonment. Eventually, all, with the exception of John, would die a death every bit as painful as Christ's own was.

After filling the pulpit week after week and opening the Word of God for forty years now, I've grown convinced that the importance of the characters in the Bible lies not so much in their HISTORICAL significance as what they reveal to us about OURSELVES. Every biblical figure represents a mirror that is held up before our eyes, showing us how their failings and weaknesses are all-too present in our OWN lives. Every time I open the Word, we ALL become Adam living in disobedience to God's commandments; we are ALL David compounding sin upon sin in an effort to hide our original transgression; we are ALL John the Baptist filled with questions and doubts in the bowels of Herod's dark prison; we are ALL Peter offering our own denials of Christ in our lives; we are ALL Barabbas, targeted for death only to receive the offer of freedom and new life instead, and the list goes on and on.

Well, this morning, I entitled my sermon "I, Judas" because we are ALL Judas as he shows us to be the liars, the thieves, and the moral cowards we often are or can easily BECOME. Judas reveals to us that side of ourselves we would pretend did not exist. We become Judas in all the little lies we tell that soon become BIG lies; in all our scheming and manipulating to get over on someone and have our own way; in all our breaches of trust that have left old friendships in ruin; in all the deception and petty thievery in which we think we'll never get caught. We all become Judas when we sacrifice our loyalty to truth or justice because the cost is much too great; when we are motivated by vanity or greed or act out of some private jealousy or hatred. The fact is that EACH of us--like Judas or Saul or all the disciples--has done his or her part to betray our Lord- and we do it more often than we would like to think. Each of us in our own way is a Judas.

The story of Judas concerns the death of the soul. He was not born a monster. He grew up in a home like ours where he experienced the same love and joy, the same laughter and tears. But pride and ambition, jealousy and hatred, avarice and greed took seed in his heart, gnawing away at it until there was no heart left, until nothing remained for God to speak to. And THAT becomes the worst fate, the most horrible judgment one can suffer- to no longer be able to hear the voice of God, to no longer own a conscience, when all those qualities that make one human--faith, love, compassion, trust- have atrophied and died. Believe me, if it could happen to him, it could yet happen to ANY OF US, ME included.

Through Judas, we are warned of the dangers of allowing sin, no matter how petty, to go undealt with. Years of pride and jealousy and petty thievery had built such a thick crust around his heart that it eventually smothered his conscience. So callous had it become that he could no longer hear the pardoning words of Christ, or recognize the love or sympathy expressed through all his actions. Here was the tragedy of it all- that one could walk and talk and abide with the Son of God over a period of years, that one could personally be on the receiving end of his gentle care and deepest affections, and NEVER ONCE be conscious of it. Judas was beyond redemption, a man most to be pitied.

But Judas is not the only one present this morning. JESUS is here AS WELL and through his Word and by his Spirit, we are daily reminded that IN SPITE OF our own treachery,

regardless of the selfishness, the pride, the ambitions, the jealousies and hatreds that we secretly harbor, his love and forgiveness CAN BREAK THROUGH THEM ALL. He can prevent them from taking root in our lives and ultimately devouring us. He gives us the power to humbly confess our sin and express new dependence upon him. He shows us that though we may often be faithless towards him, he will always keep faith with us. But we need to act decisively, we need to repent quickly and remain close to Christ lest we TOO "sow the act, and reap the habit; sow the habit, and reap the character; sow the character, and reap the eternity." Let us pray...

Gracious God, deliver us from the twin sins of pride and self-righteousness which we find we're so susceptible to. Save us from any attitude which would lead us to believe we are far better than Judas was, or that we could NEVER descend to such depths ourselves when the truth is that we CAN and, in fact, OFTEN ARE. Rather, help us to remain close to you that you may always serve as a constant source of love and gratitude and humility in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!