

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

What About Judas?

John 13:21-30

John Breon

Once again, we are in the upper room where Jesus and his disciples are sharing a meal. Jesus has just washed their feet. Then he recalls a verse of scripture that says, “The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me” (or, “turned against me”) (Psalm 41:9). He says, “I’m telling you this now, before it happens, so that when it happens you will believe I am” (vv. 18-19).

His spirit is troubled as he says to his disciples, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.” What a horrible thought. *Betray, traitor, treachery* are some of our harshest and most painful words. And for one of the twelve apostles to betray their Master, their Teacher, their Lord is nearly unthinkable. Jesus’ disciples stared at each other, at a loss to know which of them he meant. Matthew says they became greatly distressed and one after another said to him, “Surely not I, Lord?” (26:22). It’s like they were protesting but at the same time recognizing that any of them could do such a thing.

As they try to recover from the shock of Jesus’ announcement, Peter gets the attention of “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” John, son of Zebedee. “Beloved” is not an exclusive title. Other believers were special objects of Jesus’ affection and were said to be loved by Jesus (14:21; 15:9, 12; 11:5). Instead of meaning “favorite” to the exclusion of others, it could be that John marvels that he’s the object of such love. The beloved disciple is an example of the favor Jesus has for all his followers (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John*).

John is reclining next to Jesus. They are likely at a low U-shaped table, with cushions or mats around it. Jesus is at the head of the table, at the base of the U. John appears to be at Jesus’ right. Peter gets John’s attention and mouths, “Ask him who he’s talking about.”

John leans back against Jesus and asks, “Lord, who is it?” And Jesus tells him, “It’s the one I will give the bread to after I’ve dipped it in the dish.”

For the head of the feast to dip a morsel and give it to someone at the table was a great honor. We guess that Judas is next to Jesus, on his left—a place of honor at the table. And Jesus dips the piece of bread and gives it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot.

Who was Judas and why did he do what he did? In every list of the apostles, Judas is listed last. And, it always refers to him as the one who betrayed Jesus or “who became a traitor” (Luke 6:16). John repeatedly mentions that Judas would betray Jesus.

His name, Judas, is a form of Judah and means “praise to God.” Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel. King David, and Jesus himself, were of the tribe of Judah. Their nation was named after that tribe and called Judea. The people being called “Jews” comes from that. A few generations before Jesus’ time, there was a Jewish hero named Judas Maccabaeus who led a revolt against Greeks who had invaded Judea and desecrated the temple. Not many years before Jesus’ ministry, a man called Judas the Galilean had led an uprising (Acts 5:37). Judas was a popular name, a heroic name—until Judas Iscariot. “Iscariot” probably refers to the town Judas came from: Kerioth, somewhere in southern Judea.

Kenneth Wyatt says he debated whether even to do a portrait of Judas. Then, after he decided he would, he struggled with how to get someone to be the model. He couldn’t just walk up to a stranger and say, “You look like Judas”! Then, a man named Frank Harvey approached him. Harvey had a ministry of portraying and acting out the lives of Bible characters. He heard about Wyatt’s project and told him, “If you need someone to become Judas, I can be Judas for you—and for Christ.” So a man who had the talent to be Moses, David, John the Baptist, or any of the apostles, became Judas for a day (*The Apostles* 58). That illustrates that Judas could be anybody. Any of us has the potential to be Judas.

That makes the question urgent: why did Judas betray Jesus?

We don’t know about Judas’ call, but he must have met Jesus and become his follower at some point. He was one of the twelve disciples that Jesus chose and called and sent as apostles. He would have heard what Jesus taught and seen the miracles Jesus did. He would have gone on mission trips with the other disciples, proclaiming God’s kingdom and

healing people. So what brought him to the place where he could hand Jesus over to people who wanted to kill him?

Some have tried to make Judas a kind of hero. What he did was not really betrayal, but a key part of fulfilling God's plan in bringing about the crucifixion and the salvation that comes from it. You may remember a few years ago, an ancient writing called "The Gospel of Judas" made the news. The story it told was that Judas conspired with Jesus to bring about the crucifixion. But that document was written many decades after Judas died and it reflects a strain of belief that the Church rejected. Besides, Jesus didn't need Judas so he could die for us. He could have found a way to get to the cross. It adds to the tragedy of the world's rejecting Jesus that one of his close followers did betray him.

There's mystery in the cross. It was God's plan. Jesus intended to die. Yet those who betrayed him and killed him—and all of us—are responsible for our part in it. God took the worst that humans could do and turned it into the best God would do: the resurrection of Jesus and salvation offered to everyone.

So Judas wasn't a hero. Maybe he just misunderstood Jesus. All the disciples did. They were looking for a king to conquer and to kill. They expected Jesus to set up a restored Jewish kingdom in Jerusalem, free from Roman (or any foreign power's) oppression. Some have suggested that Judas handed Jesus over to the authorities in order to force Jesus' hand and get him to exert his power over his enemies. When Jesus didn't do that, Judas, in disappointment and confusion, killed himself.

Others see Judas as figuring out before the rest of the disciples that Jesus had no intention of overthrowing Rome and the corrupt Jewish leaders. Judas felt betrayed because Jesus was not fulfilling his expectations, so he handed Jesus over.

Those ideas are speculation. Let's see what the Bible actually tells us about what Judas did. In the middle of what we call "Holy Week," a couple of days before his death, Jesus and the disciples were with their friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary took a jar of expensive perfumed ointment and poured it over Jesus' head. The disciples, more specifically Judas, became angry and said, "Why this waste? Why not sell the perfume for

three hundred days' wages and give to the poor?" John tells us that Judas didn't really care about the poor, but he was a thief. He was the treasurer for the apostles. He kept their common money bag and would steal from it. Jesus defends Mary, saying that she was preparing him for burial and that they could always help the poor. Right after this Matthew and Mark say that Judas went to the religious authorities and started plotting with them how to hand Jesus over to them for the price of thirty pieces of silver (John 12:1-8; Matt 26:6-16; Mark 14:3-11).

The authorities wanted to arrest Jesus, but not publicly because they wanted to avoid a riot. So Judas offered to lead them to him in a private, quiet place. After being paid the thirty pieces of silver, he started looking for a chance to hand Jesus over to them.

The night of the Last Supper, Judas found his chance. And he plunged further into the darkness. Luke tells us that Satan (the enemy, the adversary) entered into Judas (22:3). John says that Satan put it in the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. Then, later, when Judas received the piece of bread from Jesus, Satan entered into him (13:2, 17).

Judas' greed, ambition, impatience, disillusionment gave the devil a foothold into his heart. It may have started much earlier than Holy Week. Jesus had said earlier, "I have chosen you twelve, yet one of you is a devil." He knew who would betray him (Jn 6:70-71). Instead of receiving the Holy Spirit from Jesus, Judas was entered by Satan. Then Jesus says, "What you are about to do, do quickly." And the others at the table didn't even know what he was talking about. When Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night. He went into the darkness.

A few hours later, Judas led a mob to the Mount of Olives, to a certain grove called Gethsemane where he knew Jesus often went with his disciples. He had given the temple guard and soldiers a sign so they would know which one was Jesus. Judas stepped up to Jesus and gave him a kiss of greeting—not an unusual thing in Middle Eastern culture, or between a disciple and teacher. They bound Jesus and took him away. Early the next morning, Jesus was condemned to die and was taken to the Romans for that sentence to be carried out.

When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned and was really going to die, he was filled with remorse, he changed his mind (some translations say he repented). He brought the money back to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I've sinned by betraying innocent blood." And in a callous, chilling way, they replied, "What is that to us? Take care of it yourself." So Judas threw the money into the temple. Then he went away and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3-10).

What do we make of Judas? I like what a couple of writers say about him. Bob Benson describes this scene in John's Gospel and says,

Now, here's the interesting part to me. Here was this small group of thirteen people eating supper in a small room and Jesus spoke to Judas in such a quiet tone that when he left the room the next verse says that no one else at the table knew why he left or what Jesus meant. ...

Jesus, in the last hours before His deepest agony and travail, within hours of an excruciating death was still making quiet, kindly entreaties to his betrayer. If it had been you or me, we would probably have said to the others, "There he is, the dirty fink, after all I've done for him. He's the one. He'd headed out right now to finish the deed. He never has really understood or really been one of us. But just before he goes I want the other eleven of you to look at him. I want you to see what a betrayer looks like—we ought to shave his head or something. See him, low down betrayer. He's the one. You can leave now, go on, beat it."

But quietly he said, "If you must, if you're in so deep you can't turn back—go ahead and don't prolong your suffering." And ... I believe with all my heart if Judas had said, "It's too late to stop now, but I am so sorry and miserable—would you forgive me?" there would have been a story in the gospel about a Judas whose life would have been different because Jesus loved and cared right to the end. I believe that if Judas had come to the cross the next day when Christ was so nearly dead He couldn't have spoken, His eyes would have said to

Judas, "It is okay, you are forgiven," and that look of love would have changed the life of Judas forever. (*Come Share the Being* 57-58).

By going out into the night, Judas misses what Jesus tells the disciples about loving as he loves, about the Father's house and the Spirit of truth and abiding in the vine, and all the rest. He takes himself out of their reach. Barbara Brown Taylor asks, "But does Jesus die for Judas too?" He's washed his friends' feet, knowing one of them will betray him. He fed them their supper, knowing one of them would betray him. When Jesus dipped the bread in the cup and handed it to Judas, he not only revealed who Judas was, he revealed himself as well.

What that means, I think, is that Judas is indispensable to our understanding of holy communion. Judas, of all people! His presence at the last supper is our lasting reminder that this is a meal not only for the good, the right, the faithful among us, but also for the crooks and double-crossers, the spies and imposters. It will reveal us for who we are—make no mistake about that—and that knowledge may send us running from the room into the dark, dark night.

But it may also allow us to stay put, clinging to the edge of the table for dear life if need be, or better yet, clinging to the presence of the Lord at the head of the table, whose faithfulness does not depend on ours and whose death-defying love knows no end. He is the food and drink that saves our lives, thawing our frozen hearts by taking them into his own. He is the broken, poured-out one who gives himself to us, offering to feed us again and again. (*God in Pain* 45)

As Jesus welcomes us and feeds us, he may reveal where we have betrayed or denied or abandoned him. Let's admit it and trust him to forgive us. Let's let Jesus change our story and give us a new direction as we follow him.