

Called by Name: Judas Iscariot, Scapegoating and Selling Out

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Matthew 26:1-5, 14-30, 44-57; John 13:1-2, 21-30

On this Palm/Passion Sunday we cover the last of the 12 male disciples in our series, Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. It seems fitting to look at Judas on this day, because we turn from the adulation Jesus receives as he enters the city on Palm Sunday to the increasing abandonment he experiences from Thursday evening into Friday. Betrayal, after all, comes most powerfully to and from people and ideas we love.

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

Then Jesus is anointed with oil and has his feet washed with a woman's hair at Bethany. The story continues after that:

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

The disciples then make ready for the Passover meal, and we pick up in verse:

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

Then Jesus and the disciples have the Last Supper, they go out to the Mount of Olives, and Jesus prays and talks to his inner circle. That's when Judas appears again.

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.' At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat

in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.’ Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

John’s version of Judas is slightly different. We begin with John 13:1 and then pick back up later in the story.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’ The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, ‘Lord, who is it?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘Do quickly what you are going to do.’ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the festival’; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

There is surely no more infamous disciple among the 12 than Judas Iscariot. He is not a character with whom we particularly want to identify. Judas is the one who sells out. He hands Jesus over to the authorities, and in three of the Gospel accounts, he does so with a kiss. Christian history has demonized him. Judas is a complicated figure, if not a particularly sympathetic one, and if we’re not sure exactly what to do with him, than neither were the gospel writers.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Judas doesn’t get a mention, other than in the list of disciples, until the Passion Week, when, a few days after the triumphal Palm Sunday entry, he goes to the chief priests with an offer to betray his Lord. In Matthew, Judas flat out asks, “What will you give me if I hand him over to you?” In Mark, he doesn’t lead by asking for money, but the chief priests promise to give him money if he will betray Jesus. Luke, in setting up the scene, adds a twist by saying that Satan enters into him and he goes and confers with the chief priests and officers of the temple police, and they are pleased and then they agree to give him money.

John’s gospel, written last and with an unmistakable anti-Semitic tone, paints the figure of Judas in the worst possible light. John wants to make perfectly clear that Judas is—or is going to be—a bad actor from the start. So as early as Chapter 6, the author has Jesus say, “Did I not choose you, the twelve, but one of you is the devil”—and then adds that he was speaking of Judas Iscariot. Then, in the story of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, John says that it is **Judas** who complains about Mary using the precious oil to anoint Jesus when the money could have been used to help the poor. John, who wants to stick it to Judas, adds parenthetically—“He said this not because he really cared about the poor, but because he was a thief and he was stealing money from the common purse.” By the next chapter, Satan has already put it into Judas heart to betray Jesus. The deal is sealed when Satan enters his heart after Jesus extends the bread to Judas. It’s not clear whether Judas actually receives the bread or not.

There are so many questions when it comes to Judas.

Does he betray Jesus in order to get money, or would he have done it for nothing?

Is the betrayal on his own initiative, or does the Devil make him do it?

Or, as some accounts affirm, including the non-canonical gospel of Judas, was he destined by God to betray Jesus the whole time?

Is Judas rotten to the core, as John's Gospel seems to say—asserting that he was a thief—or did something happen that flipped him, turning a basically good guy bad.

We don't know definitive answers to any these questions around the betrayal of Jesus. So if you're hoping for answers to those questions, you're not going to get them. I apologize.

There's a lot we don't know for certain about the betrayal. What we do know is that all four canonical gospels assert that Judas did it. Judas betrayed Jesus. And a fifth, the Gospel of Judas, takes pains to say that he *was* chosen by Jesus to betray him.

Whatever we know or don't know about this specific betrayal, we all know what betrayal looks like, because most of us have experienced it in our own lives, on both ends of the stick, at least in a small way if not in a big way.

“For there to be betrayal, there would have to have been trust first,” writes Suzanne Collins in her book *The Hunger Games*. Betrayal only comes when there is a degree of love and commitment involved.

Betrayal occurs, for instance, when someone you trust breaks a vow or a promise, tells a secret, or proves to lack loyalty. You can betray a person, you can betray a conviction or an idea, you can betray your own integrity. Anyone who has discovered infidelity in a love relationship, or has had something they shared in confidence come back to them after being spread far and wide, or watched a valued team member jump ship to the competition, knows something about betrayal. So does anyone, anyone really, who knows in their gut what is right and true, but acts in ways that subvert or outright reject it.

In this way, betrayal is different than denial. I can deny that I know someone or something. I can protest, like Peter did regarding Jesus, that I've never even met the man. I can fail to speak up when I know I should be saying something. That's denial.

But betrayal is something different. It's deeper and more fundamental.

The Greek word, *paradidomi*, that is translated as betrayed in the Gospels, literally means to hand over, or to give over. Betrayal is about handing something or someone over. It is about actively selling out, whether we get paid in silver coins, or in power, or in smug self-satisfaction, or in simply getting what we think we want in the moment.

As we begin Holy Week today, I think it's worth it for every single one of us in this space to think about when and where and how we might engage in handing over what is important to us, and specifically what is central to the gospel message, because I think that is what it means to betray Jesus, or to sell our souls.

When I believe that grace and welcome and feeding the hungry, and visiting the sick and imprisoned, and caring for the stranger and the vulnerable are core to Jesus' teaching—and then

on honest self-examination, I find that the way I am living or what I'm standing for is in opposition to these things, I may have handed Jesus over.

When I pray week after week after week, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and I claim that our God is a God of abundant mercy, and I cling to resentments and old hurts like a security blanket that I will never ever drop. I may have handed Jesus over.

When I know that Jesus' way is not a way of violence, and that he proved that by going to the cross and telling Peter to put away his sword, and I fail to feel or brook even the slightest sense of tension in myself whatsoever when it comes to questions like the ones the March yesterday brought up, I may have handed Jesus over. Things are complicated, but if I don't feel any tension about those issues, I may have handed Jesus over.

When I can get up on my high horse and pick the speck out of someone's else's eye and clearly identify the faults and mistakes of another person, another organization, another political party, but fail to see the log in my own eye or identify and own up to my own faults, or the faults of my own organization or my own political party, I may have handed Jesus over.

You see this exercise is not so fun when we're not picking out the other people who are Judas, but instead we're looking at ourselves. As a retired pastor I know likes to say, "We are all much better at confessing other people's sins than we are at confessing our own." Isn't that the truth? When I confess somebody else's sins, it takes the focus off of me. I can rest easy for a little bit. And so I scapegoat them or their group.

Name a person or a group that you or I scapegoat.

Do you know the origin of the scapegoat? In ancient Israel, a scapegoat was a goat that the people of a village placed all of their sins upon. They'd drive that goat out of the village.

After they'd done that, they'd feel like, "Okay! We're cool. We got rid of that goat."

Over time the goat moved from being a goat to sometimes being a person. And again, when the goat was driven out, the thought was, "Okay, we're cool. We got rid of that goat."

I love what the late Carlyle Marney, a Baptist preacher who was a huge advocate for social change in the 60's, once said about Judas and how we treat him as sort of a scapegoat.

Carlyle Marney said that Jesus died for the sins of the world and Judas died for the sins of the church. Think about that. Jesus died for the sins of the world and Judas died for the sins of the church. He became the scapegoat upon which we cast all of our sins and shortcomings as disciples, so that we could feel good about ourselves.

If we think that sort of behavior is not dangerous, we should consider the way over the centuries Christians have treated Jews as scapegoats. Jesus has always cried about that.

So this week as we progress through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Holy Saturday into Easter Sunday, let's carry Judas with us. Think about two lessons that reflecting on him can teach.

One, it is all too easy to sell out—to hand over ideas and concepts, matters that are central to the Christian message, and in so doing we join Judas in betrayal.

Two, it is also all too easy to engage in scapegoating someone else in an effort to keep us from looking too carefully at ourselves.

In Jesus' name. Amen.