

Judas Iscariot

Matthew 26:21-24 CEB ²¹ As they were eating he said, "I assure you that one of you will betray me."

²² Deeply saddened, each one said to him, "I'm not the one, am I, Lord?" ²³ He replied, "The one who will betray me is the one who dips his hand with me into this bowl. ²⁴ The Human One goes to his death just as it is written about him. But how terrible it is for that person who betrays the Human One! It would have been better for him if he had never been born."

Matthew 27:3-8 CEB ³ When Judas, who betrayed Jesus, saw that Jesus was condemned to die, he felt deep regret. He returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, and ⁴ said, "I did wrong because I betrayed an innocent man." But they said, "What is that to us? That's your problem." ⁵ Judas threw the silver pieces into the temple and left. Then he went and hanged himself. ⁶ The chief priests picked up the silver pieces and said, "According to the Law it's not right to put this money in the treasury. Since it was used to pay for someone's life, it's unclean." ⁷ So they decided to use it to buy the potter's field where strangers could be buried. ⁸ That's why that field is called "Field of Blood" to this very day.

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Our son, Bill, called us shortly before Easter. Among the things we talked about was his involvement in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. This is a Christian organization that tries to reach students. It is independent and unrelated to any denomination. And despite the name, one doesn't have to be an athlete to participate. At their last meeting, they had talked about the events of Holy Week, from the time Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to Jesus arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. The question was raised, what about Judas? Was he a villain beyond all villains, responsible for the death of Jesus? Or was he a necessary element, an important part in a divine plan for our salvation? If God planned for Jesus to be betrayed, does God blame the betrayer? If that act sets the process in motion to save humankind, doesn't that make him a hero?

I might have set this topic aside to mull over with Bill sometime in the future. But then I got an email from someone in the congregation raising the same issues. So I set to work to study the topic at some depth. I began, of course, by looking at scripture.

All four gospels and the book of Acts speak about Judas Iscariot. Mark tells us the least, saying that Judas went to the temple officials and offered to betray Jesus. They were delighted and promised to give Judas money. Then, on that fateful night, Judas appeared with a mob and identified Jesus with a kiss. Mark offers no clear indication about what motivated Judas.

Luke tells us little more, but does characterize Judas as having been entered by Satan. More than promising money, Luke says that payment was arranged.

Matthew offers a longer account. He says that the temple officials paid Judas thirty pieces of silver. During the supper in an upper room, Jesus says that he will be betrayed. He remarks how terrible it will be for his betrayer and that it would be better for him if he'd never been born. Later that night Judas identifies Jesus in the garden with a kiss. But afterward, seeing that Jesus was condemned to die, Judas was filled with regret. He returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests, declared his own guilt and Jesus' innocence, and went and hung himself. The priests took the money and bought a field where strangers could be buried.

John, the last gospel to be written, tells us that Judas carried the common funds for the disciples and that he took from that purse for his own use. John says that Satan entered Judas to betray Jesus. John also says that Jesus chose Judas for his role (John 13:18). But there is no mention of Judas being paid by the temple officials and in the garden, it isn't a kiss that identifies Jesus to the soldiers and guards: Jesus identifies himself to them.

Finally, in Acts, the book that is really a continuation of the gospel of Luke, we read one final passage regarding Judas. But here, we are told that Judas used the money he was paid to buy a field and that, somehow or another, Judas fell headfirst, and his abdomen burst open, spilling his innards.

The passages that tell about Judas raise as many questions as they answer. They are not in exact agreement about whether the money was promised or paid. Three gospels tell of a kiss but John rather pointedly does not. These are minor things. There are bigger sources of confusion. Did Judas repent, return the money, and go hang himself? Or did he keep the money, buy the field himself, and die from a tremendous fall? The accounts are varied, inconsistent & influenced by the theological opinions of the writers.

Because the scriptures vary so much, preachers have pictured Judas as being motivated by various forces. Noting that John says Judas was the keeper of the purse and that he stole from it, some have thought that Judas was motivated by greed and that thirty pieces of silver played into his greed. We don't know whether these were small or large coins and so we can't know their value, large or small.

Some have focused entirely on Judas being called a devil and have built a huge story about how Judas was second in command to Satan himself.

Some have seen Judas as chosen by Jesus for an ugly task, or perhaps pre-determined from the beginning of time as part of a detailed plan to be the one to betray Jesus.

Judas Iscariot was evidently from a village in Judea, but most, or all, of the remaining twelve were from the northern province of Galilee. It's been suggested that Judas was a Zealot, a revolutionary who looked for the Messiah to come and drive the Romans out through military victory. But he became disappointed in Jesus, seeing him as failing to act with courage. Perhaps Judas thought that by betraying Jesus it would force Jesus to at last give the battle cry and lead the people to overthrow the Romans. Or perhaps he considered Jesus to be a failure and deserving to die for misleading the people and giving them false hope.

Perhaps Judas was a tragic figure who turned against his faith when it turned out that Jesus wasn't who Judas wanted him to be. Or does the phrase, "Satan entered him" mean that Judas was possessed and not in control of his own actions?

There are so many possibilities and so little clarity. We're frustrated by this. We want answers. And the answers that we choose, may say something about us. Maybe there's a weakness that we have and unconsciously we recognize it in Judas. Or perhaps, knowing our own weakness, we want to see some other trait in Judas, so that we feel superior and safe. The Nazis emphasized every evil trait that they could ascribe to Judas and then declared that all of those traits belonged to all Jews. And so, of course, Aryans were superior to Jews.

We are drawn to villains who are so despicable, so cruel, so evil, that we find great release, great righteous anger, great satisfaction and superiority in hating them. And over the centuries, we have pictured Judas in all of these ways at one time or another.

There are a couple of things that struck me as I read the accounts in the gospels. Jesus makes it clear, it seems, who will betray him. And yet, the rest of the disciples don't seem to understand. Or, if they understand, they say nothing. That seems odd.

The other thing that is striking is that it is clear that Jesus knows who will betray him and that the results will be excruciating. Yet he eats with those who will desert him, the one who will deny him, and the one who will bring the mob to arrest him. John tells us that not only does Jesus share his last meal with them, he drops to his knees and washes their feet. He washes the feet of those who will desert him, deny him, betray him. What must it have felt like to hold their feet in his hands, look up into their eyes, and be their lowly foot-washing servant all the same? I can't imagine. I can't begin to imagine. What an overwhelming example of kindness to the undeserving! What steadfast love in spite of everything!

We are left with more questions than answers, more ambiguity than certainty. I can only offer this conclusion. Fred Craddock, a wise and thoughtful minister said, "The church is at its best when it stops asking, 'why did Judas do it?' and instead examines its own record of discipleship." (Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation series*, p 253) It is not ours to know the workings of the mind of Judas. It is not our place to judge his motives or his actions. It is not for us to assume his guilt, his punishment, or his possibility for forgiveness.

Jesus said, "how terrible it is for that person who betrays the Son of Man! It would have been better for him if he had never been born." Certainly Matthew's story of Judas' remorse, returning the money, and going out and hanging himself fits with that declaration.

As Fred Craddock said, the church – that's us – needs to examine its own record of discipleship. We bear the name "Christian," meaning one who follows Christ. Before we cast stones at Judas, we must ask ourselves if we, too, betray our Lord. Betray his teachings by lack of study. Betray his example of caring for those who suffered by our lack of compassion. Betray his love by our meager affection for our neighbor. We may know less than we wish about Judas. We may know more of what is expected of our lives than we are comfortable considering. Let us guard against betrayal through indifference. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
Before judging Judas for betraying Jesus
We must note the immense kindness and love of Jesus
And examine ourselves to recognize where we betray our Lord.