

Betrayer

He enters the city with his fellow disciples, behind the One they follow, moving along in a great coursing tide of humanity, flowing through the main street of Jerusalem.

It's the beginning of Passover week. And many thousands are in town for the festival. Waving. Cheering. Shouting. Singing. Spreading cloaks and branches on the dusty road in front of Jesus. Everyone's in a celebratory mood.

Well, not *quite* everyone. Too many thoughts and images crowd and cloud the mind of Judas Iscariot.

Something's just not right. For three long years, he's been with Jesus. He's one of the twelve. A member of Jesus' inner circle. And he remembers all the things he's heard Jesus say about a coming kingdom. A kingdom that's not the kind Judas has been hoping for. Still, he thought that when they got to the capital city, things would be different.

But here they are, coming into Jerusalem—with Jesus jouncing along on the backs of a small gray donkey and her foal. He's not looking or acting at all like a king.

This isn't how it was supposed to go down. Jesus was supposed to ride in on a big white charger, at the head of a great army that would overthrow Rome and its imperial legions and its iron fist. But that's not what's happening. Not at all! The whole city wants to know—and Judas does, too—who is this Jesus anyway? Maybe he's just another religious guru. A preacher. A teacher. A prophet. Jesus certainly isn't behaving like someone who is at last going to run the despised forces of empire out of Judas's country.

Could this have been the reason Judas makes a fateful decision? Could he have thought that alerting the authorities would spur Jesus to finally become the kind of messiah that Judas and so many others think he should be? Or could something else have motivated him?

We know that for Jesus and his followers, Judas has kept the common purse. And he has, on occasion, helped himself to its contents. Does greed drive him to betray? Thirty pieces of silver is several month's wages. But we need to keep in mind that even *before* Judas knows how much he'll receive, he's already determined what he's going to do.

Whatever his motivation, Judas Iscariot has come down through Christian history as the Bible's most black-hearted villain. Just hearing his name makes us think of ultimate treachery. Of evil incarnate. On this Palm Sunday, on this Passion Sunday, we consider this Judas who betrays Jesus the Christ.

Now you've seen the faces of people who have been betrayed. You've seen the wronged spouses of disgraced public figures, standing loyally by their unfaithful mates in front of the TV cameras. They stand there stoically. But they all have the same look in their eyes. The same pain.

Have *you* ever been betrayed? As a child, as a youth? Or as an adult? Could it have been a friend, a co-worker, a family member, even a spouse? Someone you cared about? Someone you trusted? Betrayal of any kind shocks and stuns. It stings. It hurts. Betrayal causes suffering. It causes *Jesus* suffering. Not only the agony of the cross, but the terrible pain of knowing that someone close to him has betrayed him.

But Judas isn't the *only* figure with a hand in the events leading up to Jesus' death. Does Judas alone send Jesus to Golgotha? During this holiest of weeks, if you open your Bible

and you read the passion narrative from start to finish in Matthew's Gospel, or in any of the gospels,—which I invite you to do—you'll be confronted with the complicity of Jews *and* Romans in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The complicity of both Jews and Gentiles—two groups that together make up the whole first-century world.

A world that includes the disciples of Jesus. At the Passover supper, at their last meal with him, Jesus looks around the table. And he speaks words that confound them. Imagine yourself sitting there with him. Imagine the kindest eyes you've ever seen fixed, in turn, on those of everyone in the room. And then on yours. As he says softly: *One of you will betray me.* And astounded, you too ask: *Surely not I, Lord?*

Surely not I, Lord? It's not a statement. It's a question, born of uncertainty. It's a question that makes us stop and think. Think about what Judas does. Think about what *Peter* does. Is there not a fine line between betraying someone and denying that you even know that person? Think about what the rest of the twelve do as well. After Jesus is arrested, *all the disciples desert him and flee.* Is there not a fine line between betraying someone and abandoning him in his hour of greatest need?

Surely not I, Lord? It's a question that you and I—twenty-first century disciples of Jesus—ask, too. It causes us to consider what's in our own hearts. It causes us to consider our own actions. Do we desert him when we flee the anguish of Friday and run too fast toward the joy of Sunday morning? Do we deny him when we act as though we don't have a relationship with him?

When do I betray Jesus? I'll tell you. I betray Jesus when I forget that he calls me to be a servant. When I say an unkind word. When I'm irritable or impatient. When I'm too quick to judge another. When I give my allegiance to anyone or anything other than him. When I fail to offer his compassion and care to the least of these who are members of his family. When I disobey his command to love. When I betray Jesus, I bear the responsibility. I make a choice.

But what about Judas? Did he have a choice? Or was he only a puppet? A robot? A pawn in a divine plan formulated countless ages before its fulfillment in the arrest and the trial and the crucifixion and the death of Jesus?

Do you believe that Judas was nothing but a means to an end? That he was used? If so, is God a wrathful, vengeful God

who requires satisfaction? Who demands repayment for human sin? Repayment in the form of the suffering and death of Jesus?

My sisters and brothers, the sin of violent human beings *did* hang Jesus on a cruel cross. But as one interpreter observes: “[Jesus’] death occurred...because of [his] fidelity to the deepest truth he knew, expressed in his message and behavior, which showed all twisted relationships to be incompatible with God’s shalom.”

You and I worship and serve a God whose desire and intention is for wholeness, for harmony, for peace. A God who so loves human creatures that God gives not only God’s Son, but also gives freedom of the will. Freedom of choice.

Judas, too, received this freedom of the will. He makes a choice. He acts on his own. Calculates. Pre-meditates. Surely, his deed is horrific. But Matthew gives us glimpses of Judas that we don’t get in the other gospels. Matthew offers us a different perspective. A closer look at Judas Iscariot.

After dark Gethsemane, after the kiss of betrayal, Judas hides in the crowd. In the cold, clear light of early morning, he sees Jesus bound. Led away. Brought before the council. Handed over to the Romans. Condemned to death. Right before Judas’s

eyes are the consequences of what he has done. The certainty of Jesus' fate. The sure knowledge of what Jesus will suffer.

And then Judas comes to understand exactly who this Jesus is. When you and I finally understand who Jesus truly is, that's when confession of every betrayal pours out. That's when repentance comes.

That's when confession and repentance come for Judas. And with them come overwhelming regret and remorse. An overpowering yearning to undo it all. To take it all back. But the chief priests have got what they wanted. And thirty pieces of silver clatter across the hard stones of the temple floor.

It's too late. It's done. It's finished. His mind in darkness, Judas finds a rope and a tree. Oblivion and death come quickly. Putting an end to guilt and despair greater than Judas can bear.

It's a disturbing image. It makes us pause. And reflect on what we believe. Some of us have been taught that a person who takes his or her own life is forever separated from God and forfeits all hope of salvation. Some of us have been taught that suicide is an unpardonable sin.

But that view has caused a great deal of needless pain. And it's not in accordance with the Scriptures *or* with our own

theological tradition. Hear these words from the “Social Principles” of the United Methodist Church.

We believe that suicide is not the way a human life should end...[But] a Christian perspective on suicide begins with an affirmation of faith that nothing, including suicide, separates us from the love of God...Therefore, we deplore the condemnation of people who complete suicide, and we consider unjust the stigma that so often falls on surviving family and friends.

Judas chooses to take his life instead of seeking forgiveness. In his death, is there not tragic irony? Would the Jesus *you* know not, after his resurrection, have forgiven Judas, even as Jesus forgives Peter? Was Judas beyond the reach of forgiveness? Is there anything that Judas Iscariot could do that—if there was repentance—would put him *outside* the scope of Christ’s limitless forgiveness?

Beloved, I think we hear the answers to these questions in Jesus’ words. He said to his first disciples and today he says to us: *my blood...is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.* These sins that nail Jesus to the cross are the very ones for which—with grace beyond measure and with a deep, deep,

redeeming love—he forgives you and me and all of his
betrayers.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the
Holy Spirit. Amen.