

Rev. Karen Graham - Church of the Redeemer

March 16, 2008

Palm/Passion Sunday

Matthew 26:30 – 27:66

First Reflection: Matthew 26: 14-16, 20-25; 30-56

On his last night with his disciples, Jesus made two predictions: “One of you will betray me,” and “you will all fall away because of me this night.”

Judas questioned the first prediction: “Is it I, Master?” And Peter protested the second: “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.”

But Jesus knew better. To Judas’ question he answered, “You have said so.” And to Peter’s protest, he replied, “This very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”

Betrayal. Denial. Jesus predicts both failures. The failures of two close companions. People he had taught, lived with, trusted. Judas had earned Jesus’ respect by being appointed treasurer of the group, and by sitting closest to Jesus at the Last Supper, sharing the dish of water with him. Peter had once ventured out on the water to prove his faith in Jesus, and once when asked point-blank by Jesus who he thought Jesus was, Peter had confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Messiah, the son of the Living God.”

And here they both are, on the last night before Jesus’ death, and they both fail him. Why? we wonder. What went wrong? How could this happen?

Matthew, and all of the other gospel writers either for that matter – provides little to go on here. After the incident with the woman and her expensive ointment, when all the disciples express their indignation, we are told that Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests. “What will you give me if I deliver him to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. “From that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.” That’s all the information we get. So we assume the motive was greed. For money -- about 120 days’ wages, Judas betrayed his teacher, his Lord. Does that make any sense? Was Judas waiting all along for this opportunity?

I doubt it. I don't think Judas started out with betrayal in mind. He didn't begin as a traitor. None of us do. Friendships begin with the best of intentions. Relationships start out with good motives in mind. We don't begin a relationship with hurtful intentions. Judas Iscariot had heard Jesus' call to discipleship like the rest of the Twelve, and he had responded just as they had. His life was intertwined with Jesus' life – he was part of a close-knit community of believers. There's nothing suspicious here. Judas Iscariot wasn't a creepy guy, he wasn't a spy or a subversive or anything like that. He was one of the Twelve. One of Jesus' chosen disciples. In the garden, Jesus greets Judas as "Friend." Jesus was betrayed by his friend.

Who can explain it? From friend to traitor. From follower to betrayer. For whatever reason, Judas gave up on Jesus. He kissed Jesus, not with affection, but as a sign for those who would capture him. It was a trick. Judas deceived Jesus. That night in Gethsemane was a night when darkness took over. Betrayal. Capture. Denial.

We cannot help but be disturbed. The story haunts us. What would we have done, we ask ourselves. Are we capable of such heinous behavior? Is betrayal beyond our wildest thoughts? I wonder. For our world really isn't so different, is it? Whether it's for money or power or recognition or simply for the sake of wickedness itself, betrayal still takes place. And so does denial. We're trying to save our own necks all the time. Rationalizing away questionable behavior, making excuses for poor decisions. That's how folks did it back then, and that's how folks still do it. People still seek ways to betray others -- friends, family members, bosses, employees, co-workers, political leaders, political constituents, and so on. And people still lie about what they do. They still pretend they haven't done what they have done.

Human sin had its way on that night in Gethsemane. Human sin, in all its variety of expressions, still has its way. May God have mercy. On them. On us. Join me now in this prayer of confession:

Reflection 2: Matthew 26: 57-27:10

It was too late, wasn't it? Judas had been warned by Jesus at the supper in the upper room: "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas heard the warning, but he did not heed it. He went ahead with his wicked plan – he carried out his devious plot.

Matthew tells us that Jesus knew what was coming, but that he did not try to talk Judas out of it. He explained the consequences to Judas, but let Judas make up his own mind. Judas was not being controlled by anything or anyone except himself. He was no pawn in some master plan. The choice was his. And he made it. He did what he did.

But now he repents. We get the idea in Matthew's gospel that Judas did not fully understand ahead of time what the chief priests were going to do with Jesus. He seems surprised that his act of betrayal led to Jesus' death sentence. Apparently he did not expect his deed to lead to such a drastic, deadly conclusion. And so he tries to undo it. But it is too late. The chief priests have what they wanted all along, and they don't care about Judas' change of heart. "And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, Judas departed; and he went out and hanged himself."

The early church carried with it several versions of Judas' death. Here in Matthew, Judas commits suicide. In remorse over his betrayal he hangs himself. The chief priests buy a burial field with the betrayal money. The field is called the Field of Blood, referring to the blood of Jesus, the one who was betrayed by Judas. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter recounts to the disciples the story of Judas' death. In this version, Judas himself buys a field with the money, but fatally stumbles in the field, with all his inside parts gushing forth. In this account, "the Field of Blood" derives its name from Judas' blood, the one who did the betraying.

So what we can know for sure is that near the time of Jesus' death, Judas himself died, and that a burial field for strangers, located near Jerusalem – which to this day we call a Potter's Field – became associated with Judas' act of betrayal. How it happened historically is not as crucial as the happening itself. Judas met his fate. The decisions he made led to fatal consequences. He could not undo them.

At least Judas didn't think he could. Matthew leaves us with a vivid, dramatic three-sided picture: Peter's denial on the left; Jesus on trial in the middle; and Judas'

desperation on the right. What different fates await these two prominent disciples. Both of them failed Jesus. One denied. One betrayed. Both failed. But just listen again to Matthew's description of their responses to their failure: Peter "went out and wept bitterly." Judas "went and hanged himself."

Judas believed himself beyond redemption. Or maybe he just didn't believe Jesus was a Redeemer. At the last supper all the other disciples call Jesus 'Lord.' Judas refers to Jesus as "Rabbi." Of course "Rabbi" is a title of respect and distinction. But we sense more intimacy in the title, "Lord," don't we? To call Jesus "Lord" is to understand that he is more than our teacher. Judas wasn't at that point. He didn't make a confession of faith in Jesus as Lord. To him, Jesus was his teacher, his master. And so when faced with his act of betrayal, he hangs himself. Rather than confront Jesus or his fellow disciples he considers his life to be totally unworthy.

What do you think? Was Judas beyond redemption? On the cross Jesus says, "Father, forgive them." Did that forgiveness extend to Judas?

Peter also failed Jesus. And Peter also experienced deep remorse. He wept bitter tears over his act of failure. But he waited it out, didn't he? And so the Peter who denied Jesus on Friday was the same Peter who went to the tomb on Sunday. The Peter who failed Jesus was approached by the risen Christ and told to feed his lambs. The Peter who denied knowing Jesus was the same Peter who preached to the crowds on the Day of Pentecost, leading 5000 to confess faith in Jesus Christ. Peter's failure did not cut off Peter's future. Judas' did. One man wept. The other man hung himself. One disciple kept the community together, and helped begin its amazing growth. When he died it was a martyr's heroic death. And his name lives on, an example forever of the church's rock of faithfulness. The other disciple did not trust the community enough to let himself be re-admitted. And when he died it was a shameful death. His name lives on only in infamy. No one names a son Judas anymore. There are no St. Judas Iscariot churches.

Two disciples. Two failures. Two different paths. Did it have to be that way?

Think about these things this week -- as we approach the cross of Calvary -- as we experience once again the drama of Christ's passion. Think of Judas. Think of Peter. Think of yourself. Your failures. Your betrayals and your denials. Think of your

relationship with Jesus. Who is Jesus to you? And consider your relationship with the community of believers, too. Do you trust your fellow disciples? And think of your responses, your reactions. Can you accept the mercy of Christ.

That's a lot of questions for you to consider, I know. But this is an important week. When we meet here again next Sunday morning we want to be ready. May this indeed be a holy week for you – and when Easter dawns may you find yourselves willing and able to approach the tomb.

God bless you this week. God be with you this week. And God have mercy on Judas. God have mercy on Peter. God have mercy on us all. Amen.