

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 2, 2023

Like Judas, Like Peter

Matthew 27:1-10

This particular Sunday on the church calendar can get a little confusing. As the opening section of today's service confirmed, we're here partly to remember Jesus' victorious arrival in Jerusalem, setting in motion the events of Holy Week. We're here to join the crowds in the joyful procession, shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 21:9). The mood is energetic and upbeat. Our sanctuary is a place of praise.

But soon we're reading Scripture about Jesus being arrested, tried, mocked, and crucified. The atmosphere turns dark and somber. Praise fades away and gets replaced with silent shock and horror. Celebration turns into suffering, and the suffering culminates in death.

And then, in our text for today's sermon, we go back to another point in the story, a scene that falls in between Jesus' triumphal entry and his terrifying execution. Judas reappears, deep in remorse about his part in shedding innocent blood. By now, it's no wonder that this Sunday feels hard to get a handle on. We seem to move back and forth in time. Locations change quickly. We encounter a perplexing cast of individuals and groups. Cheering crowds. Faltering disciples. Manipulative religious leaders. Corrupt political figures. Abusive soldiers. A suffering Savior. This is a lot to take in and process on one Sunday.

Maybe Matthew can help us by the way that he approaches the story. In today's text, he turns our attention to Judas. Note that this scene comes right after Matthew's description of how Peter disowned Jesus. Three times, in the span of just a few verses, Peter denies that he knows Jesus. When confronted with the accusation that he has been "with" Jesus, Peter crumbles, volunteering to take an oath that what he says is true. Matthew's terminology indicates that Peter even went so far as to curse Jesus as part of his denial.

Then Matthew presents us with Judas. Having realized the magnitude of his own betrayal of Jesus, Judas shows up before the chief priests and the elders. He's deep in regret, sinking in remorse, and returns the money he received for turning Jesus over to them in the first place. Judas recognizes and acknowledges his own guilt and Jesus' innocence.

As he unfolds the story of this innocent yet condemned and crucified Savior, notice how Matthew places the failures of Peter and Judas side by side. Judas isn't the only follower of Jesus who faltered. Judas isn't the only one of the called who disowned our Lord. Judas isn't the only disciple who demonstrated disloyalty, especially in the midst of temptations and testing. No doubt there were times and places, events and experiences, especially near the end, when each of the disciples struggled with the prospect of where Jesus was leading them, and whether they should abandon him and his cause. As author Philip Yancey has summarized it, "... Judas's disenchantment differed, again, only in degree, from what other disciples had felt. When it became clear that Jesus' kind of kingdom led to a cross, not a throne, each one of them slunk away into the darkness."¹

And now, Judas sees no way out of his own darkness. We certainly don't know all the factors and forces that have brought him to this point. He's an elusive figure. There's no shortage of speculation about his motives. Apparently, hunger for money was part of what drove him, though that doesn't tell the whole story. Ambitions for power and prominence may have factored into his behavior as well. Maybe Judas saw his association with Jesus as a means of securing influence with others and positioning himself for a prestigious spot in the long-awaited kingdom of God. After all, in due time the oppression of Rome would be out and the reign of the Lord would be in.

Author Eugene Peterson has written:

Among the apostles, the one absolutely stunning success was Judas, and the one thoroughly groveling failure was Peter. Judas was a success in the ways that most impress us: he was successful both financially and politically. He cleverly arranged to control the money of the apostolic band; he skillfully manipulated the political forces of the day to accomplish his goal.

And Peter was a failure in ways that we most dread: he was impotent in a crisis and socially inept. At the arrest of Jesus he collapsed, a hapless, blustering coward; in the most critical situations of his life with Jesus, the confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi and the vision on the Mount of Transfiguration, he said the most embarrassingly inappropriate things. He was not the companion we would want with us in time of danger, and he was not the kind of person we would feel comfortable with at a social occasion.

Time, of course, has reversed our judgments on the two men. Judas is now a byword for betrayal, and Peter is one of the most honored names in church and world. Judas is a villain; Peter is a saint. Yet the world continues to chase after the successes of Judas, financial wealth and political power, and to defend itself against the failures of Peter, impotence and ineptness.²

Yet what do real success and real failure mean when viewed through the lens of Jesus' crucifixion? Remember that the stories of Judas and Peter are woven into the larger story of what it means to have a Messiah like Jesus. Maybe Judas had come to the conclusion that Jesus' form of Messiahship was destined for failure, and that the best way to secure himself and his future was to join the powers that be in putting Jesus to death. But that all hinges on a definition of success that looks very different from what's revealed to us in the cross, where Jesus' will and God's will are one.

At the cross, letting go of your life, rather than clinging to your life, is revealed as the way of the Messiah Jesus. Dying to self, rather than trying to save self, is unveiled as the way of the kingdom. But Judas was looking at things through a human lens rather than through a kingdom of God lens. As one pair of co-authors has put it,

He [Judas] could not accept a suffering servant who bears the sins of others and lays his life down in order to conquer death. If we're honest with ourselves, such things are not easily believed today, for that matter. Who wins through self-sacrifice? Who would want to trade in his or her own plans for a prosperous future and submit to a God-King's new plan? Who says that the first shall be last and the last shall be first?³

This seemingly upside-down way of viewing things comes into play in the scene right after today's text. Jesus stands before Pilate, the Roman Empire's representative in Jerusalem. As the governor, Pilate has enormous power and authority. He literally has the power of life and death over Jesus. As a religious court, the Sanhedrin had the power to decide against Jesus, but they didn't have the power to execute him. That power belonged to Rome. And yet, as others have pointed out, when viewed through the lens of the cross, it's reasonable to ask who really holds the power in this situation, Pilate or Jesus? If Jesus is exerting

God's power, the kind of power that operates through weakness, then Jesus, not Pilate, is the one who's really in charge.

Soon Matthew shows us Jesus in his most powerless state, crucified. As Graham Tomlin has captured it, "It is hard to imagine a less powerful figure than someone nailed to a cross. Not only does he have no economic, social or political power, he cannot even move... He has no apparent influence whatsoever...; he can simply hang there and suffer."⁴ And yet, God's power to save is most decisively revealed at the very point where it seems weakest. When the centurion and the rest of the execution squad see Jesus' death and the events it triggers, they exclaim in unison, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

The cross is where we see the might of God, displayed in the form of mercy. Jesus' death is where God's grace meets us in our own corrupted and distorted understandings of power, prominence, and influence. Jesus' death is where a forgiving God extends the hand of rescue, to redeem you and me from our merely human ways of thinking. Jesus' death is where God reaches out to us in reconciling love, to restore us to himself, especially in the ways that we ourselves deny, disown, or are disloyal to our Lord. Like Peter, like Judas, like all the other disciples, we too falter and fail. We too resist the kind of kingdom that requires a cross. We resist having to sacrifice and suffer for the sake of Christ. We resist having to follow a way to life that leads through death.

But on the other side of that dying to self is resurrection life. That will come into even sharper focus next Sunday, Easter Day. True, we already know and experience this life-giving power of God here today. But if we neglect the cross, or bypass any reflection on the death of Jesus, then we're failing and faltering as disciples. We're thinking and acting as if we don't know him. We're denying him and betraying him. We're seeking his kingdom, but forsaking his cross. And that's why he calls us to repentance, not just when we first confess him as Lord, but at every step along the way of discipleship.

In reflecting on today's text, one commentator has summarized it this way: "Peter's remorse leads to repentance, Judas's leads to terminal despair."⁵ It's not as if Jesus had completely forsaken Judas and given up on him. For one thing, there was the disciples' final meal with Jesus, where Judas, like all the others, had a place at the table. The bread and the cup were just as much for him as for them. The door to repentance wasn't completely closed. Perhaps Jesus' words to him at the table might lead him to turn and embrace the merciful reality of the cross. And then, when Judas led a mob to the garden so they could capture and arrest Jesus, Jesus still addressed him as "Friend" (Matt. 26:50). Yet in the end, Judas died in isolation and hopelessness, refusing to receive what Jesus had come to give, forgiveness and life.

Peter, by contrast, was still open to the reconciliation that culminated in the cross. Though he had disowned Jesus, Jesus didn't disown him. Peter's failings were great, but Christ's grace was greater. The events of Easter would bring a restoration beyond Peter's imagining, and open the way to a future where he would lead the community of disciples forward as a sign of the kingdom, in the way of the cross. This is the way that Christ once again calls you to follow this day.

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 193.

² Eugene Peterson, *Leadership* (Vol. 4, No. 1) n.p.

³ Ed Cyzewski and Derek Cooper, "You're Probably More Like Judas Than You Think." *Christianity Today*. March 26, 2013. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/march-web-only/youre-probably-more-like-judas-than-you-think.html> (March 29, 2023).

⁴ Graham Tomlin, *Looking Through the Cross* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 65-66.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*. IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997) 380.