

“Were You There?” Sermon Series
Judas – Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-50; 27:3-5
March 16, 2025
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

It’s always been a popular idea to give your child a biblical name. While we may not know many Methuselahs or Nebuchadnezzars or Nimrods, some other names from the Bible are always among the most popular. A minister I used to work with had three older brothers named Matthew, Mark, and Luke. When he was born, his parents didn’t want to appear too religious and call him John, so they named him Jesus. Just kidding! His name is Timothy. Some of the most popular biblical names are those of the disciples: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Phillip, Thomas, Matthew. I know a Simon, a Thaddeus and a Bart (short for Bartholomew). If I ever had a son, I wanted to name him Matthias, which is the name of the 13th disciple who was appointed in the book of Acts.

But there’s one biblical name that you never hear. “Kory, I’d like you to meet Tom, Matt, and Judas.” Oh. How unfortunate. How many Judases do you know? No one names their child Judas these days, because that name is associated with one of the most reviled characters in all of history, the disciple Judas Iscariot.

And yet, I find his universal condemnation to be a bit odd. Judas did not accuse, try, condemn, sentence, mock, or spit upon Jesus. He didn’t put a whip to his back or a nail through his hands. And yet, he more than anyone else is identified as the bad guy in this story. No one attended Benedict Arnold Elementary School, and no one names their kid Judas.

Unlike some of the other disciples, we don’t know a lot about him. The gospels don’t tell us about how or when he was called to follow Jesus, so we can only assume it was with the same enthusiasm and vigor as the others. No one starts off following Jesus with the expectation of one day betraying him. We don’t start off down the wrong path, even if we end up going that way one step at a time. Judas saw Jesus, he believed, and he followed, like the other disciples.

We know that he was chosen to serve as the treasurer for the disciples, so he must have displayed some positive characteristics. This office is not usually given to someone thought of as selfish and irresponsible. It was a respected position and probably indicates the degree of esteem in which he was held. And yet, Judas isn’t even mentioned in Matthew’s gospel until chapter 10, and listen to how he’s labeled: “These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.” Really? Not “the polite one” or “the son of Barbara” or even “the one with the mole on his face?” That’s a tough introduction.

Here’s my question about Judas: Why? Why did he do it? Why did Judas hand Jesus over to the Jewish authorities to be arrested? In their gospels, Luke and John both say that Satan entered Judas and caused him to do what he did. Some might say that it was all a part of God’s plan and that Judas didn’t have a choice. But I wonder if Luke and John were struggling to provide an answer, so they let Judas off the hook. I don’t believe either God or Satan controlled Judas like a marionette on a string. Do we ever lose our free will, our ability to make our own choices? If we can excuse Judas for his actions, then it

becomes easy to make the same excuses for our own, to plead temporary insanity when we mess up. “The devil made me do it.” If Judas didn’t have any choice in what he did, why would he be so grieved about it that he would take his own life? Just as Peter bears the responsibility of denying that he even knows Jesus, Judas bears the responsibility for betraying Jesus.

Why? Let me give you a couple theories to chew on. The first one says that Judas was greedy and betrayed Jesus for the cash, but that doesn’t fit what we know. The amount of money he was given was modest, about the price you would pay for a small lavender latte, and later he returns it – the money, not the latte. Besides, as the treasurer, he could have dipped his hand into the silver coin jar anytime he wanted. There’s something more at work here besides greed.

Another theory says that Judas was disappointed that Jesus wasn’t the military hero the Jews were expecting. Judas’ surname, Iscariot, may have been taken from the Greek word *sicarii*, which means “dagger-bearer.” This word was also used to describe the group of Zealots who used guerilla tactics to undermine the Roman authority. Judas may have been looking for Jesus to be the kind of action-hero savior who would lead this rebellion. When Judas realized Jesus wasn’t that kind of leader, he may have betrayed him out of anger or revenge.

There’s a third theory which I find very compelling, and with which I’m still wrestling. It says that Judas was not greedy or angry, but instead was actually trying to help Jesus in his mission. Judas knew from the Hebrew scriptures what the Messiah was supposed to do – to vanquish Rome and establish God’s kingdom on earth – and he felt Jesus just wasn’t moving fast enough. Judas had become disillusioned because Jesus was talking about dying rather than setting up his kingdom. Judas may have thought, “If I can just nudge him a little, if I can just force his hand, get him arrested, then he won’t have any choice but to act.” Maybe Judas did what he did because Jesus was not the Savior Judas wanted him to be.

It’s easy for us to feel contempt for Judas. After all, he’s Judas, the betrayer. It’s easy for us to distance ourselves from him: “How could he do that? I would never do that!” But I believe that anyone, put into the right - or wrong - circumstances, facing the right amount of pressure, is capable of betrayal, even betraying Jesus. We all have what one commentator called the “Judas chromosome.” When given the choice between exercising our faith or saving face, between sacrificing what we have or looking out for ourselves, between following Jesus or worshipping other gods, at some point all of us will betray Jesus. Sometimes we let Jesus change us, but sometimes we change who Jesus is to fit our own agendas.

Like Judas, we’ll never always make the right choices. That’s not an excuse for our sins, but it is reality. What we have to be careful of is how we follow up these moments. This is where a comparison between Peter and Judas is helpful. Matthew tells us that, after his betrayal, Judas was overcome with remorse. That’s a good starting point, but it’s not the same as repentance. It’s one thing to feel badly for what we’ve done; it’s quite another to actively seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Remorse means feelings of regret; repentance is a change of heart. Remorse is saying under your breath, “I shouldn’t have done that.” Repentance is looking in the eyes of the one you’ve wronged and saying, “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Peter repents and his relationship with Jesus is restored. Judas never takes that step. After his betrayal, he doesn't return to the community of the disciples, where forgiveness would be found. We need our family of faith the most when we are at our lowest. Judas doesn't realize this. Instead, he suffers alone, increasing in despair, unwilling to believe he could be forgiven, until his remorse drives him to take his own life. Unlike Peter, Judas doesn't stick around long enough for Easter.

And what he misses is the forgiveness and grace that Peter ultimately received. I believe if Judas had stuck around, he would have finally understood who Jesus really was, the magnitude of what Jesus was doing, he would have been fully restored, and we would all know a bunch of people named Judas. But he mistakenly believes that he has fallen so far that he doesn't deserve to live. He didn't give Jesus the chance to show him that no one – no one – is outside of the realm of God's grace. No one has fallen so far that they are no longer eligible to receive God's mercy. If Peter could be forgiven, then so could Judas.

Everyone is worthy of that forgiveness. That includes us AND the people who have wronged us. We may not want Jesus to forgive them, and we may have a hard time forgiving ourselves, but God's grace is offered freely, if only we're willing to let go of who we think Jesus should be and instead let him be who he is. Being a follower of Jesus means actually following him, not pushing and prodding him to be who you want him to be.

That's what Judas misses. You may have noticed that in the upper room, when Jesus tells the disciples that one of them will betray him, they all answer, "Surely not I, Lord!" Except for Judas. He says, "Surely not I, Rabbi!" "Rabbi" is the Jewish word for teacher. It's a respectful word, but not quite on par with "Lord." And therein lies the crux of the issue for each and every one of us. Who is Jesus for us? Is he a great teacher? A prophet? A dispenser of spiritual "to-dos"? A character in a book? Someone we hang out with on Sunday morning? Or is he the Lord of our lives, the one with the power to forgive and restore and resurrect even those who have betrayed him? How we answer that question may mean the difference between remorse and repentance, between death and life. Will you let Jesus change you, challenge you, call you, forgive you? Who is Jesus for you?