

Monday in Holy Week

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Hebrews 12:1-3      John 13:21-32

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For the past few days,  
you and I have been getting ourselves ready—  
preparing ourselves as Jesus prepares himself—  
for both he and we know  
that the gut-wrenching events of his final days  
are just around the bend.

On Palm Sunday,  
we cheered him on  
as he rode into Jerusalem.

On Monday night,  
we sat at dinner with him,  
and we smelled the sweet perfume  
as Mary anointed his feet.

And last night,  
we heard him talk about  
the fact that he *will* die,  
and that in his death  
there will be glory,  
for him and  
for all who come to follow him.

But up until now,  
this has all seemed . . .  
*academic*,  
hasn't it?

Up until now,  
it has all felt more like 'going through the motions':  
talking about what we know is yet to come,  
but knowing that it hasn't come yet.

But tonight, that changes.

Tonight, you and I sit here,  
and we watch as Judas looks Jesus in the eye,  
gets up from the table,  
and sets everything in motion.

Tonight, there is no going back.  
Tonight, we know it's true:  
Judas is going to betray him,  
and Jesus is going to die.

Do you know that on this day across the globe,  
there are whole groups of Christians  
who get together  
and burn Judas in effigy?

Could you imagine  
if that were part  
of our Holy Week lineup?

You can just envision  
the Facebook invitation  
emblazoned on your screen:  
“Join us at St. Anne’s this Wednesday  
for the ritual burning of Judas Iscariot!  
Traitors be damned!  
God demands a killing!  
(Please remember to click  
'like' and 'share.' )”

We love to love Jesus,  
so it naturally follows  
that we love to hate Judas.

But on the other hand,  
there have been many over the past few years  
who have tried to redeem Judas,  
tried to rehabilitate him  
and restore his reputation.

Not too long ago  
the National Geographic Society  
published a translation  
of a newly found gnostic gospel:  
*The Gospel of Judas.*

In this so-called gospel,  
Judas is painted as a kind of hero,  
the *only* one of Jesus’ disciples  
who actually “gets it,”  
who truly understands  
the words of his Master.

In this “secret” account,  
Judas does not so much *betray* Jesus,  
as he simply *hands him over*.  
He is an accomplice not to the authorities, but to *God*:  
merely a player in the grand, divine drama.

But here’s the problem.

As much as we try to paint Judas  
as one thing or another—  
as much as we strive  
to figure him out,  
to pin him down,  
to put him in a box,  
whether it’s a “good” box or a “bad” box—  
all of it is pointless.  
All of it is for naught.

For don’t you see?  
The whole reason we do this—  
the whole reason we try  
to scrutinize,  
to categorize,  
to understand  
people like Judas—  
is so we can reassure ourselves  
that we are not like them.

Even in our own day,  
people commit heinous, unspeakable acts,  
and we pull out words like  
“murderer,”  
“monster,”  
“miscreant”  
in order to separate ourselves from them.

Or, we try to get into their heads,  
to sympathize,  
to analyze,  
to realize  
that there must be some deeper reason,  
some misunderstood purpose  
for why they’ve acted  
as they have.

But what we dare not say—  
what we would never  
bring ourselves to admit—  
is that we do all of this  
to make clear to ourselves that  
we are so, so very different.

The hard truth, though, is that  
Judas is not some literary type.  
Judas is not some necessary character in a play.  
Judas is not some vile, dastardly villain,  
nor is he some noble, misunderstood saint.

Judas is us.

Judas is a beloved disciple:  
seated *close enough* to our Lord  
to take the bread from his hands;

*loved enough* by our Lord  
to have his feet washed by him;

*trusted enough* by our Lord  
to carry his purse.

And yet,  
and yet,  
and yet—  
for reasons we will never understand—  
he throws it all away.

Are we not like this?  
Are we not like Judas?

Are we not like the Apostle Paul, who says,  
“I do not understand my own actions.  
For I do not do [the good] I want,  
but I do the very thing I hate”?

Are we not like the fabled scorpion  
who tells the frog,  
“Take me across the river.  
I won’t sting you!  
I won’t sting you!  
I promise!”

only to plunge our stinger into his back,  
drowning us both in the water?

Are we not like every other human being  
who *sees* the good,  
who *wants* the good  
but with eyes wide open  
turns—day in and day out—  
*away* from the good?

Friends,  
we do not get to look at Judas tonight,  
throw our hands up,  
and say in all our self-righteousness,  
“O Lord, I thank you  
that *I* am not like *him*.  
Because deep down,  
we know . . .  
that’s not nearly as true  
as we wish it could be.

But can I tell you the good news?  
Can I tell you the extraordinary thing?

The extraordinary thing  
is that when it came to Judas,  
Jesus kept him around.  
Jesus never kicked him out.  
Jesus held him close,  
even though he surely knew  
what was to come.

What a grace.  
What a love.  
What a mercy.

What a mercy that even in our betrayals,  
even in our darkest sins,  
even in our worst and most selfish moments,  
God keeps us around,  
and God is able to use us—  
to use people like Judas—  
to accomplish the purposes he has  
for the good of us all  
and for the whole world.

What a grace.  
What a love.  
What a mercy.

So on this night,  
no matter how you feel about Judas Iscariot,  
no matter how you feel about yourself,  
we will *not* be raising up any effigies  
or burning them on a post  
in order to show our righteousness  
or to prove our love for God.

Instead, we will simply wait.  
We will wait,  
and in two days,  
we will watch  
as *another* figure is raised up,  
a different effigy,  
a different man.

We will watch as our own Master  
is lifted high atop a post  
and nailed into its crossbeam.

And there,  
despite all of our betrayals,  
despite all of our selfishness and sin,  
despite the fact that we are all  
so much more like Judas  
than we'd ever want to believe,  
Jesus will be lifted up,  
and he will show *his* righteousness  
and he will prove *his* love . . .  
not only for God,  
but also for us.

And there,  
we will be redeemed.

What a grace.  
What a love.  
What a mercy.

Amen.