

Wednesday in Holy Week

Hebrews 12:1-3

John 13:21-32

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
how *NOW* is the time . . .
that his ministry comes to its culmination,
and that in his death
there will be plenteous redemption for us all.

Up until now, though,
it has all felt more like 'going through the motions':
talking about what we know is yet to come,
but knowing 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.

Did 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.

A few years back
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,
pin him down,
and 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.

Why?
Well, don't you see?
The whole reason we do this—
the whole reason we try
to scrutinize,
villainize,
and 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" and "monster"
to separate ourselves from them.

Or we try to get into their heads,
to sympathize,
analyze,
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 cannot bring ourselves to admit—
is that the real reason we do all of this
simply to assure 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 just a guy,
and Judas is us.*

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

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

trusted enough by our Lord
to bear the responsibility
of carrying 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 his stinger into his back,
sabotaging and drowning them both?

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,
“Thank God *I* am not like *him*.”
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 grace of it all?

The grace of it all
is that when it came to Judas,
Jesus knew who he was,
but he still 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 our mistakes and sins—
even the mistakes and sins of people like Judas—
to accomplish his purposes
for the good of us all.

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
to show our righteousness
or to prove our love for God.

Instead, we will simply wait.
We will wait,
and in two days' time
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 different post
and nailed into its crossbeam.

And there,
despite all our betrayals,
despite all 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 just for God,
but for us all.

And there,
we will find plenteous redemption.

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

Amen.