

Has Judas Died for Our Sins?

Matthew 26:14-16; 47-50

Theodore J. Wardlaw

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas

Here in the season of Lent, we are always being introduced to a rich menu of characters. Like Peter, the loveable neurotic who so wants to please Jesus but rarely has a clue about how hard that can be. Like Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who is said to have organized the plot to kill Jesus, the one who was likely involved in the trial of Jesus. Like the unnamed woman in Luke who was a sinner, who brought an alabaster jar of ointment to a dinner party thrown by a Pharisee so that she could anoint Jesus' feet and bathe them with her tears and her hair. Such vivid characters, such colorful props, that we encounter during Lent. When Jesus was arrested by the priests and the elders of the people in the garden of Gethsemane, one of those with Jesus reached for his sword and took a swing at the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear; and Jesus said, "Put your sword back...for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." That poor slave—probably there against his will—gets his ear cut off. Then there's Pontius Pilate—a mid-career guy who would rather be anywhere than in Jerusalem serving as the governor of an occupied territory—exasperated over these Jews who will not compromise or listen to reason. The story of Lent just crackles in any gospel you happen to be reading with interesting characters.

And then there's Judas—the most pitiful character of them all. These portions of Matthew's gospel that have been read to you today are bookends really, which hold together a more extended story that includes Judas. So we began with the first bookend—a short scene in which Judas goes to the chief priests and says, "What will you give me if I betray Jesus to you?" And they agree upon a price—thirty pieces of silver (It wasn't that much for an errand like that, but maybe that's not the point.)—and Judas begins to look for a moment when he can turn Jesus over to the powers that be.

What happens next is Matthew's version of the last supper. It's the inauguration, really of the Eucharist—the sacrament of holy communion. There is a bowl, there is bread, and there is wine; and you will doubtless get to the bread and the wine before this Lenten season is over. What I want to call to your attention today is that bowl. I don't know what kind of bowl it was. Maybe it was a finger bowl where you wash your hands. More likely, it was a bowl of sauce into which one might dip some bread. Whatever was in the bowl, Jesus says, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me....It would have been better for that one not to have been born." Everybody's wondering who it is, and everybody asks, "It's not me, is it, Lord?" "It's not me, is it?" "Not me, is it?" And finally it is Judas who speaks: "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus says, "You have said so."

Soon they're off to the mount of olives, and Jesus says to all of them, "You will all become deserters of me this night..." Peter takes exception with that prediction, and Jesus says to Peter, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And Peter says, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you," and all the disciples agree. Judas, by the way, is not with them. He's

the treasurer, after all—the one who handles the money. Maybe he lingers after the meal to pay the bill and tip the waiter; or maybe, this close to April 15, he goes to work on his taxes.

But soon enough, we see him again—here at this other bookend when he brings a big crowd of temple police. They come upon Jesus near where he’s been praying in Gethsemane, and they’re there to arrest him. Judas, according to a plan they’ve hatched, goes up to Jesus and says, “Greetings, Rabbi,” and kisses him, as if they really need Judas’ help identifying Jesus. Jesus says to Judas, “Friend, do what you’re here to do;” and so, thanks to Judas, the police lay hands on Jesus and arrest him.

What happens next is the finger-pointing, the very beginning of the construction of an apparatus—now more than twenty centuries old and still going strong. An apparatus of self-righteous blame, when it comes to Judas. It’s a smear campaign. It happens before the gospel of Matthew is even finished, because not many chapters later, Matthew will write that before Jesus is even crucified, a guilt-ridden Judas returns the thirty pieces of silver to the priests and commits suicide by hanging himself. Of course, since it’s tainted money, the priests can’t return the silver to their own treasury—that would be wrong and impure!—so they put that money toward a plot of ground, the potters field, to use for burying strangers. Because, don’t you see, Judas is now such a stranger to the gospel story.

Even in the writing process of the gospels, the church is doing a smear campaign on Judas. Later, for example, in the gospel of John, John not only slams Judas by name, but calls out his daddy’s name, too, as if now it’s the other way around, and the sins of the children are visited upon the parents. And then at Mary’s and Martha’s house, Martha serves a meal, and Mary takes a pound of costly ointment and anoints Jesus as if for burial. What a beautiful act of devotion! “But Judas,” writes John, “said, ‘Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?’” This he said,” so John’s narrative goes, “not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it.” That’s a quote from John!

And then in the book of Acts, the story is not that Judas gave the tainted money back to the priests, but that he used it to buy a field himself, but then he fell down and essentially exploded in that same field. “And,” according to Acts, “all of his bowels gushed out.” I mean, really? Is there nothing that scripture won’t resort to to make the point of how utterly alone and untouchable Judas is?

If we had been there, back in the days when the story of Jesus was making its way purposefully toward the cross, we would have noticed, I think, the beginning of a smear campaign being done on Judas. And friends, the more unforgiven and unforgivable we make him, the safer and cleaner we are.

On out into the history of the church, it was Origen of Alexandria, the third-century theologian, who wrote that the real reason Judas hanged himself was to seek Christ in the other world and to ask for his pardon—which, of course, Origen implied, he would not get. And then later, there was Dante’s *inferno*, that fourteenth-century epic poem in which Judas is consigned to the lowest circle of hell. It’s a smear job!

Had we been there, could we have spotted the apparatus? And, if so, what do we make of it? Why all this interest, across twenty centuries, in driving one nail after another into Judas’ coffin—unless perhaps the very act of focusing on him protects us from focusing on ourselves. Just look at Peter, who, just as Jesus had predicted,

denied knowing him three times that night—so soon in that night that the rooster hadn't even crowed once. But look more deeply at the story, because it wasn't just Peter. Before this chapter in Matthew's gospel is over, we read those terrible words that summarize so much of the life of the church across the ages: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." They all had their hands in the bowl! But they let Judas pay the price. Judas is the one whose job across the ages is to make us disciples look good. So it is that Carlyle Marney once said, "If Jesus dies for the sins of the world, Judas died for the sins of the church."

But all the same, it's still so tempting, in these days, too isn't it, to look for a Judas—in Ferguson, in Queens, along the border between the US and Mexico, amongst the immigrant groups who would love to come to this country. In situation after situation, if we can find a Judas to blame, we get off as clean as hounds' teeth. But weren't we there too, with Judas? And haven't we always been there?

Karl Barth, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, in his multi-volume magnum opus *Church Dogmatics*, spent more than fifty pages on Judas—the gist of which was this: that Judas was undoubtedly a disciple of Jesus, no more so and no less so than Peter or John. He could not forgive himself, said Barth, because he assumed that Jesus wouldn't have forgiven him. But "we," he said, "are terrible judges of ourselves, and that's not our job." I love that: (a) we are terrible judges of ourselves, and (b) that's not our job. He's right. We are terrible judges of ourselves, and that's not our job.

It took me a long time to finally screw up the courage to see the movie "Selma." It was a disturbing movie on so many levels, but my wife Kay and I finally summoned the courage and went to see it when it was playing in the theatres. We were both children during so much of the civil rights movement, but by virtue of the simple fact that we were southerners, and, I suppose, privileged southerners, we were steeped in its reality. Our families did not know people who were members of the Klan, who committed acts of violence, but we did grow up hearing the rhetoric. Many white people felt betrayed by the so-called "outside agitators" who were coming into communities to just stir up discontent among people who, from that white perspective, had heretofore been so happy, so content and appreciative. And many African Americans felt betrayed by the ongoing word that Lyndon Johnson, for example, is pictured as representing so often during that movie: "Wait, wait, this is not the time; there will be another time that's better... wait, wait." Each side had a Judas.

The film recalls the brutal and historic murder of an African American Baptist deacon named Jimmie Lee Jackson. He had taken part in an evening march in Alabama a few weeks prior to Bloody Sunday in Selma, and when troopers ambushed them on that evening and the march went bad, he had hustled his mother and his 82-year-old grandfather into a restaurant where they tried to pose as diners looking at the menu. But those troopers came in with their billy clubs and pulled them out of their chairs and beat up his mother and his grandfather; and because he tried to prevent that, they shot him twice. Killed him.

The next scene is his funeral, and David Oyelowo, who portrayed Dr. King at the movie, thundered from the pulpit this question: "Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?" And then came the answer: "Every white lawman who abuses the law to terrorize. Every white politician who feeds on prejudice and hatred. Every white preacher who preaches the Bible and stays silent before his white congregation. Who murdered

Jimmie Lee Jackson?” He asked again. And then he went on: “Every Negro man and woman who stands by without joining this fight as their brothers and sisters are brutalized, humiliated, and ripped from this earth.” In that moment, with tears running down my eyes, I was there with Judas. And in fact there wasn’t just one Judas; there were thousands.

We’ve tried all these years to scapegoat him, tried to point the finger at somebody else. But if we fail to recognize Judas dwelling also in ourselves, we have missed the point of the gospel. If we do not acknowledge Judas as our brother, we miss the essence of redemption. And if we continue to silence the voice of Judas, we lose two things—first, we lose something of our humanity; and second, we lose the profound experience of God’s love. For as someone has put it, “Judas is not the original betrayer; Judas is not the primal betrayer; Judas is only the typical betrayer.”

In the chapel at Austin Seminary, which is a beautiful gothic jewel of a place, a kind of cathedral in miniature, there’s a wall that separates the nave (or the sanctuary, as we sometimes call it) from the narthex. And across that wall, just above the doors that take you out of the nave and through the narthex to the outside, are carvings of the shields of all the disciples—twelve of them, disciples who became apostles. I can look at those shields now and identify who they stand for. There’s Peter and Andrew and James and John and Phillip and Bartholomew and Thomas and Matthew and James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddeus and Simon the Canaanite...and then there’s Matthias. He was the one who was added later, to replace you-know-who.

If I had just a little bit more courage than in fact I have, I would design a shield for Judas too, and put it up there with all the rest. It might disturb the symmetry of things, but I think he belongs up there. St. Judas. Conflicted and dysfunctional and wrong as he no doubt was, he was no more imperfect than anybody else on that wall.

After all, he’s not the one who died for us. Jesus is. And across these many centuries, just like he promised, Jesus still waits to meet us—waits to meet all of us, even Judas—at the world’s most welcoming table.