

JESUS LOVED JUDAS EVEN SO

Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

based on Matthew 21:1-11 and Matthew 26:14-25
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In 1979, my father retired from IBM. He had served the company for almost 40 years. I know that his last day of work was a poignant one - emptying out his desk, removing his calendar and family photos, saying goodbye to colleagues and co-workers, saying goodbye to his career as a computer engineer.

I'm sure that my dad, on his last day of work, was full of feeling as he reminisced about all the engineering breakthroughs that he had participated in during his career. I know he felt good about all that he had accomplished. And I know he was sad to leave this work that he so loved to do. Yet, I know he was disappointed that his last years with the company were so stressful, working under a new breed of very young, aggressive, unappreciative managers who were quite full of themselves. His last day at work surely was bittersweet – sweet with good memories and a sense of accomplishment, bitter because of goodbyes, the end of an era, and possibilities that remained unrealized.

Any time anyone of us goes through some major change like retirement, or moving to another city, or watching our children grow up and move away, it is poignant, it is bittersweet. This is what Jesus surely felt as he entered the city of Jerusalem. His short career as a prophet and a spiritual teacher was about to end, and he knew it. It was wonderful to be greeted by such supportive folks waving palm branches and crying out "Hosanna" as he entered the city. And Jesus no doubt felt good about all the special times he had shared with his disciples, when they broke bread together, when he could see the growing look of spiritual enthusiasm in their eyes, when he could sense their fire to love and serve God, when he could see the best that was in them rising up and coming into the light. All that was very sweet.

But at the same time it was bitter for Jesus to see all the palm waving folks quickly losing their enthusiasm, and the Pharisees being so hard-hearted and resistant, and the Romans being so brutal, and his own disciples being so limited in their understanding and resolve. The emotional limitations of the disciples

were terribly disappointing. Under fire they showed their true colors – their fears, their weaknesses, their spiritual immaturity, their cowardice. So, entering Jerusalem for Jesus was a bittersweet experience - a little like my father's retirement.

Probably the most bitter thing of all for Jesus was Judas' betrayal. Judas was a friend. Judas was the treasurer of the first group of disciples according to the gospel of John. Judas had loved hearing Jesus teach. Judas had loved how Jesus befriended him, and how Jesus befriended others, even the most socially ostracized people despite the criticism Jesus received for being so inclusive.

Jesus had invited Judas into his inner circle, and into his heart, knowing full well that Judas was a loose cannon, that Judas was erratic and dangerous like a wounded animal. Even so Jesus loved Judas. Even so, Jesus was willing to take a chance with Judas, invest his love in him, and believe in his potential goodness. Even so, Jesus tenderly washed Judas' feet as he did all the other disciples, even when he knew that Judas was about to turn on him. This is how Jesus treats everyone of us.

Judas cracked under the pressure of entering Jerusalem. He turned against Jesus and turned him in to the Jewish authorities for 30 pieces of silver. We don't really know why Judas did that. I'm not sure Judas understood why either, anymore than we understand ourselves and the foolish things we do sometimes. It is hard to believe Judas could be the grateful receiver of Jesus' love on one day, and then viciously betray him for a mere 30 pieces of silver the next. However, we DO know Judas felt terrible about his betrayal. The gospel of Matthew says that, after Jesus' arrest, Judas tried to give the money back to the Pharisees, and then he went outside the city and hung himself.

I don't think we will ever know the complex reasons behind Judas' betrayal. Maybe he was mad at Jesus for asking him to do things that he felt could not do, like love the Romans. Maybe Judas was afraid of Jesus' love and of getting too close to God. Maybe Judas was an addict and needed the money for a shot of opium. Maybe we don't really need to know.

We all, like Judas, from time to time, are a terrible disappointment to others, to our friends, to our family members. We all, like Judas, sometimes hurt the very ones who we love, we turn on them in anger, or we betray the tender trust of others. We all, like Judas, sometimes do nasty things, things that we regret, like our disgraced Governor Spitzer. We sometimes are not able to do the things that we most want to do, and we end up doing the very things we hate.

A few years back, a group of us from Emmanuel all drove to Syracuse to see "*Jesus Christ Superstar*" playing at the Salt City Theater in Syracuse. Toward the end of the production, the cast sang a very touching song entitled, "*Can We Start Again, Please?*" The song began after Judas betrayed him, after Jesus

had been arrested, after Peter had denied him, after all the disciples ran away in fear. Suddenly, the whole cast came out on stage and they sang this sweet, plaintive song of regret, almost with the naïve innocence of children, as they asked God if he could possibly turn back the clock of time so that they could start all over again. They had made a mess of things. The darkness they found themselves in was so tangled, and confusing, and overwhelming - they just longed to go back to a time before they had made so many terrible mistakes concerning their walk with Christ.

Like the entire cast in Jesus Christ Superstar singing "*Can We Start Again, Please*", we too desperately want to start over and wipe the slate clean. We, like them, and like Judas so full of regret before he hung himself, want the night to go away and leave us alone. We just want to be happy again, to be problem-free, to be better more noble people. Why do we have to be so complicated and erratic and so disappointing?

So we should not be too quick to judge Judas. He was a complicated person. We are complicated too, and we can see ourselves in Judas. How many times have we betrayed our own spiritual life? How many times have we been hypocrites or compromised the values we hold most dear? How many times have we made decisions about how we will spend our time or our money that have left Jesus in the dust? So like Judas, we realize that we too, are sometimes a grave disappointment to God, and that we are part of that bitterness of Jesus' bittersweet experience of Jerusalem.

When Jesus was on the cross, he prayed, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" I wonder if Jesus was thinking of Judas when he said that prayer? I wonder if that prayer is directed to the Judas that is deep within you and me? I think it is. We don't know what we are doing half the time.

Jesus hanging on the cross – surprisingly this is where God's true nature is most perfectly expressed; this is where even the most dull person can finally see the truth about themselves and about God's grace. There is Jesus hanging on the cross because of Judas, and yet Jesus is loving him and praying for him even so. God chooses to hang in there with you and me and Judas and the rest of erring humanity, and patiently suffers the disappointment, the frustration, the pain of human beings constantly going astray, hurting each other, crucifying the innocent, forgetting completely why they were given the gift of life.

Karl Barth, the great German theologian, once said, "*God's patience is greater than human sin.*" Instead of impatiently blotting out those who sin, God chooses to quietly suffer disappointment and pain as she gently holds all our rough edges and shadows and firmly encourages us to find a better way. In I Peter 2:21, we read, "*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his footsteps... When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges*

justly.” As disciples of Jesus, we are called to rise to this same level of maturity, patience, kindness, and love, and make the same commitment that God makes - not to punish or lash out, but to love and redeem. This is no easy task, but this should be our starting point for all our decisions, both individual and national.

Jerry Harpt writes about how he learned this important lesson as a twelve year old. He writes, *“I had a certain elderly woman on my paper route. On a mindless Saturday afternoon, a friend and I were hurling rocks onto the roof of her house from a secluded spot. The object of our play was to observe how the rocks changed to missiles as they rolled to the roof’s edge and shot out into the yard like comets falling from the sky. One of the rocks I threw missed its mark, and went sailing through a small window on her back porch. At the sound of breaking glass, we didn’t look back as we sprinted out of there.*

That first night I was too scared about getting caught to be concerned about the old lady. However, a few days later, when I was sure that I hadn’t been discovered, I started to feel guilty. The woman still greeted me with a smile each day when I gave her the paper, but I was no longer able to look comfortably into her face. I made up my mind that I would start saving my paper delivery money to pay for the broken window. Three weeks later I put seven dollars in an envelope with a note explaining that I was sorry for breaking her window. I waited until it was dark, snuck up to the old lady’s house, and put the envelope through the letter slot in her door.

The next day, I handed the old lady her paper and I was able to return the warm smile that I was receiving from her. She thanked me for the paper and said, “Here, I have something for you.” It was a bag of cookies. I thanked her and proceeded to eat the cookies as I continued on my route. After several cookies, I felt an envelope and pulled it out of the bag. When I opened it, I was stunned. Inside was the seven dollars and a short note that said, “I’m proud of you.” (Stories for a Faithful Heart, compiled by Alice Gray, p. 150)

God treats us the way that elderly woman treated that boy who had broken her window. She patiently waited and waited. For three weeks she smiled and greeted the boy kindly, as she waited for him to come around. She understood what it’s like to be a 12 year old boy, and she accepted and loved him even if he never managed to return to make things right. It was just a wonderful bonus for her that he finally did come around.

We are all called to be like this woman. If your child or your spouse is sick or suffering, you sit by their side, you hang in there with them, you are understanding about their incapacity or their short temper. You remain steadfast, patient, longsuffering, always looking to bring something positive to their troubled situation. If Judas was your child, isn’t that what you would do? It is love that makes you this way. And it is love that makes God this way too, for God is love.

Yes, Jesus' experience of entering Jerusalem was bittersweet. But it was not tragic for him, even though he died on a cross. It was not tragic for him because he understood and completely accepted Judas, and the disciples, and the Pharisees, and the Romans.

Jesus did not regret befriending Judas, anymore than he would regret loving you or me. Jesus in the end, knew that God holds and redeems us all tenderly. This is the big mind of Christ that you are invited to grow into. You can have this big mind of Christ that expresses such understanding and acceptance of others. You can ask Christ for it right now. The road into Jerusalem may be bittersweet, but it does not end in that broken city. If you and I take on the big mind of Christ, we will glide through these human trials and find our way into Easter.

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