

Faces of Failure: Judas Iscariot

Matthew 26-27

Over the past three weeks we have looked at three faces of failure, Nicodemus, the disciples, and Jesus family. Today we will be dealing with Judas Iscariot.

While pastors don't hesitate to preach on Mary or Peter or Thomas or Paul, Judas is different. He's one of Jesus's chosen companions, someone who heard Jesus's words and saw his deeds, and yet he betrays him. What can we possibly learn from one whose name has become synonymous with betrayal?

Biblical scholars, and theologians have suggested at least three possible motives for why Judas did what he did. Some have suggested it was a divine necessity.

By the time we get to our reading in Matthew, Jesus has told his disciples three times that he "must go to Jerusalem," where he will be "delivered into the hands of men and killed." Some say that for Christ to accomplish his work someone had to betray him, and God chose Judas as that someone. They say he had no choice. He was predestined or ordained to betray Jesus.

If it is true, it would absolve Judas of responsibility. He simply did what God destined him to do. It might also suggest that God has so ordered all lives—including our own—that people can't help but do what they do.

But our reading suggests Judas had more freewill than this approach suggests. For example, Judas initiates his betrayal. He is the one who goes to the chief priests and elders and offers to deliver Jesus into their hands, for a price. The fact that he asked for payment suggests he could have decided against doing it and Jesus warns Judas against betraying him. As they were sharing the Passover meal, Jesus says that "the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed." Judas is not a pawn or puppet of God. He has chosen the path he will take.

What our text suggests is that it was greed. When Judas went to the chief priests and elders, he asked, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" It was clearly a solicitation for money, and they obliged, giving him "30 pieces of silver." While none of us would condone selling out Jesus, it's not hard to understand how it could happen.

Yet greed may not have been the main issue for Judas. "Thirty pieces of silver" is a meager sum. And if it was all about money, it's hard to explain why Judas wanted to return it after Jesus was condemned. Others say it was not divine necessity or greed that drove Judas but rather frustration.

Judas had spent three years in the presence of Jesus. He had heard him talk about the coming kingdom of God. He had witnessed the crowds hanging on Jesus's every word. He had glimpsed Jesus's glory. He had believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the one who was to lead the revolution, the one to rally all of Israel against Rome and restore the nation to its former glory.

So, he sought to force Jesus's hand by delivering him to the chief priests and elders. He figured the great military messiah within Jesus would emerge and the people would follow.

Two-thousand years later we still only get glimpses of the kingdom of God here and there, now and then. We too become frustrated with Jesus when we're holding a loved one losing the fight against cancer. There are times in which we grow impatient and want to spur Jesus on.

Such impatience would make sense of Judas's regret. If he thought his betrayal would launch the revolution and lead to Israel's freedom, then he would naturally be distressed when the chief priests and elders turn Jesus over to be executed.

There is something to be said for all these possible explanations for Judas's betrayal, yet our text hints at a fourth. It suggests Judas betrayed Jesus because he no longer believed Jesus was the Savior of Israel. It suggests Judas' failure was not rooted in divine necessity, greed, or frustration, but in lost hope.

Our reading points to this lost hope in the dialogue Jesus and the disciples share during the Passover meal. Jesus announces that one of them will betray him. And so, in Matthew's Gospel, each one asks Jesus, "Is it I, Lord?" The only exception is Judas. While he asks the same question, he says instead: "Is it I, Rabbi?"

The fact that Judas uses the term "rabbi" or "teacher" suggests he doesn't share the disciples' view of Jesus. In fact, in Matthew's Gospel "rabbi" is a negative term. In chapter 23, Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees "love being called rabbi by others" but are hypocrites who don't practice what they preach. He tells the disciples they should never use that title or allow themselves to be called by it.

And yet not only does Judas call Jesus "rabbi" at the Passover meal, but he also uses it again in the Garden of Gethsemane. He identifies him with the words, "Greetings, Rabbi," hinting again that he has lost hope in Jesus as the one to redeem Israel.

That lost hope makes sense of Judas' decision. It makes sense of his failure to heed the warning Jesus offered about betraying him. Why would he care what Jesus said if Jesus wasn't anything more than another teacher of the faith? It also makes sense of his change of mind—not repentance, but change of mind. While he didn't believe in Jesus as Lord, he probably didn't expect him to be killed and didn't want his blood or anyone else's on his hands. And it even makes sense of his suicide. Without hope, he simply gives up.

That failure is, in and of itself, sad. But do you know what makes Judas's story truly tragic?

If he had only held on a little longer, waited out the next few days, hung on until Sunday morning, he would have found the hope he'd lost. "He didn't need to take his own life," writes King Duncan. "He didn't even need to spend the rest of his life punishing himself. He could have made a new start. His sin could have been washed away by the grace of the man he delivered into the hands of the authorities." If only he'd have hung on, he could have discovered that Jesus was the one for which he and all of Israel hoped.

There are times in life when all of us need to be reminded to persevere. We need to be reminded of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. But that is especially true of those who might be losing--or maybe have lost--hope. When you're wondering where God is when your children suffer or why evil so often seems to triumph over good or how it is that the kingdom has come but so much remains the same, remember Judas's story and don't give up. Don't turn away from Christ and the faith. It has been confirmed by his resurrection, by the transformation of his disciples, by the emergence of the church, and by the continuing power of the Spirit at work in God's people today. More importantly, it has been confirmed by a legion of Judases who failed their Lord but still hung on to find the grace to believe again.