Who Wants To Be A Friend To Judas?

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Matthew 21:1-11; 26:36a, 47-50        April 9, 2006

The scene was surreal, at least as I replay it in my mind. Jesus was kneeling in a garden, praying as if for the first time, or the last. Not far away from him physically, though an immeasurable distance away from him spiritually, three of his disciples were sleeping soundly. To be sure, it was the time of night that most people in Jerusalem would have been asleep—perhaps all but those who were up to something really good or something really bad. The latter had the bigger numbers; by all appearances, Jesus was alone.

From a distance came sounds of conversation, clanging metal, a boisterous laugh or two, and a bossy voice barking military commands. A crowd was winding its way out of the precincts of the city and apparently headed toward the garden in which Jesus was praying, whether on its way to the well known grove of olive trees or going somewhere else nearby. Jesus may have looked up quickly and around momentarily, perhaps glimpsing the light of a torch or two in the distance, before again giving himself completely to his prayers. Likely the disciples fidgeted a bit, maybe with one scratching his head and another swinging a hand as if swatting at a gnat, but it would take more noise than sounds muted by distance to awaken them.

Then, suddenly, the crowd appeared in the garden. Lights from torches erased the dark in which Jesus was praying. Bravado sounds of soldiers dispelled the silence in which the disciples were sleeping. What were soldiers doing here along with some of the authorities of the city? And, why was Judas with them? What is going on here? the disciples must have wondered to themselves as Peter slipped his hand to his side and patted the sword that he had strapped on to be sure it was there.

Jesus got to his feet, perhaps tugging a bit at his robe. Judas, who seemed to be leading the way for the crowd, was walking toward Jesus. But, the whole scene conjured up a sense that it was taking place in slow motion. Judas appeared hesitant, if not nervous. Maybe he was unsure of himself, still trying to answer his own question—was he doing a good thing for a bad reason or doing a bad thing for a good reason. The sight of Jesus immediately in front of him made Judas aware that he no longer had time to figure out the answer to that question. It was time to act. So, Judas walked over to Jesus and kissed him—the sign by which, he had promised the authorities, he would identify Jesus.

I wonder what that kiss was like. Did it feel the same to Jesus as it did to Judas? Was it a gentle kiss communicative of warmth and a familiarity bred by love or was it a mechanical-like quick brush of dry rough lips across the face of a person into whose eyes Judas could no longer look? I wonder if that kiss tasted more like the bitter herbs of Passover pain than honey from the wilderness sweet with promise.
Sometime back, I read a very brief account of this moment in time penned by Frederick Buechner. Though, to this second, I cannot explain why Buechner’s description of this encounter between Jesus and Judas impacted me as it did, the author’s words struck me with a poignancy and a power that I have seldom experienced while reading. Buechner observed that, having eaten his last meal on the last evening of his life, this would be the last time Jesus would feel the touch of another human being except in torture. Then, Buechner wrote this sentence: “It is not the lamb of God and his butcher who meet here, but two old friends embracing in a garden knowing that they will never see each other again.” I am telling you that I could hardly bear the piercing feeling evoked by these words though I could not stop reading them again and again.

Great goodness, I thought, here is where religion becomes reality. Here is where hypocrisy is exposed and authenticity becomes transparent. The substance of our faith is not revealed in our confessions of lofty doctrines or through our speculations about the future. The substance of our faith is made clear in how we treat our friends in some perilously pivotal moment in our own Garden of Gethsemane—those whom we betray and those who betray us. The essence of Christianity resides not in our views about the practice of charity but in how we respond to the kiss or handshake or pat on the back or nod-of-a-head or stare of desperation in the eyes of a neighbor toward whom we feel enmity. In the final analysis, our identity as people of grace, our fidelity as followers of Jesus, comes down to the manner in which we treat people who have treated us most poorly.

Oh yes, I know today is Palm Sunday. I am well aware that this is the day in our church on which we celebrate being a church. And, my question is, given what we know about Jesus and how we understand loyalty to him, who of us wants to be a friend to Judas and his spiritual kin?

Though most of us do not admit it, we think of Judas frequently. I understand that reality. The fact is that we are almost always in need of a Judas in our lives—someone to pin “it” on, whatever the “it” refers to—someone to blame, someone to whom we can point and say, “If it hadn’t been for you, this would not have happened. He started the argument. She prompted the eruption by calling me that inflammatory name. You could have counted on our loyalty had you not been so brazenly evil and drawn us into your plot.” Time and time again, we need a Judas to condemn harshly, to ruthlessly punch in the gut, and ultimately to kill. We need a Judas as much as the ancient Hebrews needed a lamb on which to lay their sins and slit its throat on the Day of Atonement. Judas will take the pressure off us. Beside him, we don’t look half bad. If nobody steps forward to serve as Judas, we will pick somebody. We need Judas almost as badly as we need Jesus.

But, that’s not all that I mean when I say we need a Judas. The other reason we need him is even harder to swallow. Judas is the one who tests our identity as a Christian and our credibility as a church. How we treat the Judas in our midst forever will say more about the real nature of our community of faith than will a stack of books on the theology and meaning of being a church or a public relations campaign meant to enhance our image.

With the imprint of, if not the moisture from, Judas’ kiss still on his cheek, Jesus walked away from this one who had been his disciple and out of the garden to lay down his life for Judas. Yes, you heard me correctly. If Jesus excluded Judas from the possibility of his forgiving
embrace and life-altering love, then all of us are excluded as well. Jesus loved Judas when Judas
could not love himself. Indeed, Judas gave up on himself long before Jesus ever would have
given up on him or anybody else.

Friends, this Jesus—this Jesus—is the One in whose name we meet, whose prayer we
pray, whose meal we eat, whose procession into Jerusalem we celebrate. God forgive us for
trying to reshape him into a pious person who would have nothing to do with those who had
done wrong, insisting that people not come to him until they had their lives in good order,
extending his blessing only to individuals who appeared already blessed. Jesus was a friend of
Judas right up until the end. Never did Judas move beyond the reach of Jesus’ love or the
embrace of Jesus’ grace—Never!—not even that eerie night in a garden outside Jerusalem. As
Buechner wrote of that stunning encounter between Jesus and Judas, “It was two old friends
embracing . . . knowing that they (would) never see one another again.”

When Buechner pondered this scene from the gospels, he saw Jesus with his eyes closed,
his body a little unsteady, leaning backward a bit, and clutching robe as if to steady his stance by
holding on to it. Buechner thought of Dostoevsky’s Father Zossima who said, “I ponder, ‘What
is hell?’ I maintain that hell is the suffering of being unable to love.” As for me, I revisit and re-
envision this impassioned encounter over and over wondering if there were ever a time when
Jesus stared down the demonic with more power and brought hell to its knees with more force
than in that moment when he looked his betrayer in the eye and said, “Friend.” Friend? Friend!

There is so much in Holy Week to make us think about the meaning of being Christian
and the nature of a community of Christians that meets as a church. But there is no more
poignant or powerful moment than this for those purposes. Waving palms is a piece of cake
when we see Jesus. Shouting Hosanna is like picking flowers under the warm sunshine of a
spring afternoon. Breaking bread and drinking wine bring our souls as well as our taste buds to
their feet in praise. Anyone with any sensitivity at all can hate a crucifixion and feel fear amid
the heavy winds that snarl dark clouds and accompany rolling thunder, bright lightning, and
pelting rain. But, to stand in a garden facing a person on whom you thought you could depend
for anything and realize that person not only has disappointed you but hurt you in ways that will
not be known until years have passed and to be able to call that person “friend,” extend to that
person love, and be willing to act selflessly for that person’s benefit, there, there, is the act in
Holy Week that most properly would be accompanied by herald trumpets and loud hosannas and
eventually be repeated in the places in our lives where we feel either the kisses on the cheek or
the slaps in the face of one who either loves us in inexpressible ways or hates us as we cannot
imagine we could be hated.

The church and all who give form to its body ought always be spared the hell of not being
able to love and be prepared to embrace with selfless care the lives of those who can do better if
only they can get past their worst behavior imaginable.

Dear friends, I am grateful to God that we are together as Northminster Church. I pray
that our fellowship may always exist as a refuge and a community of redemption, that we may be
a people who are friends to individuals in relation to whom Judas looks like a patron saint. If we
are to be known and talked about in this community, let us be known and talked about for living
as Jesus lived and loving as Jesus loved and treating as friends people who have no other friends.
As I fight back tears thinking of Jesus and Judas standing in that distant garden looking at each other, thinking of the life they had shared together, wondering how on earth they ever got to this moment—standing as two old friends who would not see each other again, I find myself looking around in search of those who need for me or for us to gaze into their eyes and say and mean it, “Friend!” Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, it all comes together today, ironically, the same day on which it all begins to come apart. We see people waving palms as if greeting a king and hear people making promises they intend to last forever. But, we also see people bending over in hurt inflicted by broken promises and hear people pleading for understanding and forgiveness in the wake of betrayal, conflict, and fragmentation.

Lace the enthusiasm of our celebration of Palm Sunday with humility enough to make us face the reality of our potential for evil as well as good. Pervade the declaration of our promises with recognition of the uselessness of promises never translated into actions.

On the first day of this sacred stretch of time called Holy Week, grant us forgiveness as well as courage, resolve as well as vision, that as individuals we may be your people and as a church we may be Christ’s body. Amen.