

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 March 28, 2010 (Palm Sunday - C)
 John 18:1-12; "Judas: Despair or Hope?"
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

We don't know a lot about Judas – at least compared to the other disciples. There's no call story, no introduction to him; he's named in the list of disciples in the gospels but we don't really hear about him until late in Jesus' ministry. In fact, there are only 5 passages in the Bible that speak of him! We can assume that as one of the 12 he traveled with Jesus, participated when the disciples went out and preached that people should repent. They cast out demons, healed people, saw miracles. But we can't help but ask, how can it be that Judas was a part of all this and then betray Jesus. From the time of our childhoods, we see Judas as a villain – the betrayer – I know we don't think of him with the same fondness we do for Peter, for example. We hear him complaining about the use of the expensive lotion Mary wanted to put on Jesus. And, of course, we read the betrayal story every year as part of Passion Sunday and throughout Holy Week. What is it that Judas can teach us about being a disciple of Christ?

Why did he join the group of disciples following Jesus? Perhaps the group needed a treasurer – to keep account of the money bag. Maybe this was just a job for Judas.

We want to make sense of Judas, don't we – and there are lots of theories about why he betrayed Jesus – from simple greed for the bribe money, that the devil entered into him and made him do it. Another theory is that he wanted Jesus to lead a revolt against the Romans and got angry when it became clear that no revolt was planned.

We know from scripture that Jesus was aware of the coming betrayal – he talked about it several times, and though he didn't mention Judas by name, he did identify him indirectly. This fore knowledge has led some to argue that the betrayal wasn't an act of free will – but was imposed on Judas as part of a divine plan for the atonement between God and people. There are arguments among scholars as to whether Judas should actually be blamed for the betrayal – was it an act of free will or not? Or was he a negotiator in a secret prearranged surrender as a sort of prisoner exchange – and his portrayal as a traitor is a historical distortion? And then there's the discovery of a Coptic manuscript in the 1970s, translated in 2006, entitled the Gospel of Judas – it puts forward a theory that according to early Christian writings, Jesus asked Judas to betray him, that Judas was indeed the beloved disciple.

Scholars and theologians have argued for years about Judas – and that discussion will probably continue. Will we ever really know the truth? Does it really matter that we KNOW the truth? Maybe we're overthinking this. There is, of course, a place for scholarship and discussion based on new knowledge – but maybe we're asking the wrong questions.

Fred Craddock sums up all this discussion well: "The church has never been fully persuaded by its own efforts to explain Judas Iscariot. Satan entered into Judas but Judas had to let him in. Judas has been called a thief, a money lover, a devil from the

beginning. His betrayal has been called the act of a greedy man, a disappointed man, a man chosen for an ugly task, a man trying to force Jesus to act by precipitating a crisis. Here is one who was chosen after a night of prayer to be in the inner circle of Jesus. He was taught and then sent to minister with apostolic authority. He enjoyed the same success as the others on those missions to preach, to heal, and to cast out demons. He was in every sense of the word an apostle. What happened? There would be no value in attempting a new theory to explain Judas. The church is at its best when it stops asking, ‘why did Judas do it?’ and instead examines its own record of discipleship.”

(Interpretation: Luke, p,253)

Yesterday the Church Council met for their annual retreat – it’s great to spend some time away with our colleagues in ministry and for the most part suspend our regular “working” agenda. We began by exploring the differences between membership in the church and discipleship – thinking about what are the marks of a true disciple – what does it mean to be like and live like Jesus? We did a couple of exercises, taking very preliminary steps in developing our own personal spiritual development plan – recognizing that our own discipleship journey has an effect on the whole church – and all this led to some good discussion about our own record of discipleship – both as individuals and as church. It’s a conversation that will certainly continue – but the free flow of ideas was wonderful. This is a group of people who take seriously their leadership roles in our church.

But as I was doing one of the exercises myself, I thought of how easy it is, for instance, to participate in worship: to say the prayers, listen to and be affected by the music, hear the words of scripture and the sermon, celebrate the sacraments, sing the hymns – and then walk out the door back into our daily lives. Then I thought about what it means to be a disciple – a lifelong learner of and from Jesus Christ. I’m thinking it means we have to go deeper, go deeper into how we live our lives, go deeper into what informs our lives, go deeper to realize what’s really important to us, and then to allow ourselves to be transformed. The marks of discipleship: a heart for Christ alone, a mind transformed by the word, knees for prayer, arms for love, a voice to speak the good news, a spirit of servanthood and stewardship. We have to slow down – I’m seeing the image of a stone skipping across a pond – moving so fast that it doesn’t sink. Don’t we so often live our lives like that, on the surface. Don’t we so often hold on to the way we’ve always done things. Don’t we so often leave what we hear at worship at the door when we leave. Don’t we sometimes have trouble integrating our faith life with our daily living? Maybe that’s part of what happened to Judas.

We talked yesterday at the retreat about a changing population and their religious preferences – an article entitled “New Trends in Belonging” talks about the fastest growing group in the religious landscape – those people who answer the question, what is your religion, if any – the largest group: those who answer NONE. At the same time, we’re seeing people more than ever giving of themselves as volunteers helping others. Not just money contributions – contributions for Haitian earthquake relief have even surpassed donations for Katrina relief – but also volunteer hours are up as well. There’s at least one class at the Ridgewood Avenue school who was required to do a service project – one clearly helping others – there wasn’t an amount of time specified but they had to do something. On Friday afternoon I met my neighbor – not a member of the church – her daughter and 2 of her friends – they’d asked if I could help them find a

service project to do – well, we loaded up all the groceries from the cart in the back of the sanctuary along with about 30 boxes of cereal, courtesy of donations from the confirmation class and went over to Bethel Love church. We were warmly greeted by the church secretary and I took my friends into the kitchen and talked about the meals prepared and served. We went into the huge pantry room where the food is stored before distribution. And we saw bags of food that were given out on Saturday – they were a little stunned as they learned about the working poor, what went into those bags of food and how long it had to last a family. It was a terrific teachable moment for those girls. And that’s not the only example of service requirements, is it – high school classes require a service component. I know the Girls’ Club has such a requirement. Volunteerism is an important part of our life together in community. And that’s all good!

But we have to go deeper, I think, if we want to be disciples.

My home church has established a new position: Associate Minister for Discipleship. In her letter to the congregation accepting this new call, Jane Rowe writes, “There have been allusions over this year to the “culture change” that is needed in our congregation. God is calling First Church to foster a culture of discipleship – as disciples of Jesus we want to learn from him the ways of thinking, speaking, acting, and being that lead to abundant life. We learn from Jesus how to love God, one another and ourselves more fully.”

She continues, “It is not primarily a culture of volunteerism that we need; rather it is a culture of service in Jesus’ name. Volunteers fill needs either because it feels good to them to do it, or because they believe it’s important for everyone to do their part. Those motivations are great, as far as they go. But disciples are motivated by something deeper – their desire to live in the way of Jesus, to serve because Jesus serves. Service is the way that we put our faith into action.”

We have to go deeper if we want to be disciples. And I wonder if maybe that’s part of what happened to Judas – living as one of the 12, learning with those first disciples, watching Jesus in action – maybe he didn’t allow himself to go deeper, to be transformed – at least not until it was too late. When he’d chosen a path of betrayal from which there was no escape – even when he tried to give the money back. How tragic is that. But maybe there’s some hope too amid the despair.

Frederick Buechner wrote a book called Peculiar Treasures: a Biblical Who’s Who. I’d like to share with you what he says about Judas:

“Nobody can be sure, of course, why Judas sold Jesus out although according to John’s gospel, he already had a reputation for dipping into the poor box from time to time so the cash may have been part of it. If, like the other disciples, he was perennially worried about where he stood in the pecking order, he may also have been reacting to some imagined slight. Maybe he thought his job as treasurer to the outfit was beneath him. Another possibility is that he had gotten fed up with waiting for Jesus to take the world by storm and hoped that betraying him might force him to show his hand at last. Or maybe, because nothing human is ever uncomplicated, something of all these was involved. Anyway, whatever his reasons were, the whole thing went sour for him soon enough.

“Slipping out of the last supper before the party was over, he led the way to the garden that he knew they were planning to adjourn to afterwards and said to lay low till he gave the signal. It was dark by the time his former associates showed up and maybe

for fear that he might scare them off if he used any other method, the way he showed the soldiers which was the one to jump was by kissing him. That was all he'd been paid to do, and as soon as he'd done it, there was no earthly reason why he couldn't have taken off with his laundered cash and found a place to spend it. But when the time came, he wasn't in the mood.

“There are several reasons of what he did instead, of which the most psychologically plausible seems to be that he gave the money back to the ones who'd given it to him and went out and hanged himself. This time there doesn't seem to be any ambiguity about the motive.”

Buechner continues, “There is a tradition in the early church, however, that his suicide was based not on despair but hope. If God was just, then he knew there was no question where he would be heading as soon as he'd breathed his last. Furthermore, if God was also merciful, he knew there was no question either that in a last ditch effort to save the souls of the damned as God's son, Jesus would be down there too. Thus the way Judas figured it, hell might be the last chance he'd have of making it to heaven, so to get there as soon as possible, he tied the rope and kicked away the stool. Who knows?

“In any case, it's a scene to conjure with. Once again they met in the shadows, the two old friends, both of them a little worse the wear for all that had happened, only this time it was Jesus who was the one to give the kiss, and this time it wasn't the kiss of death that was given.”

Not the kiss of death but the kiss of life. As we begin our journey through Holy Week, the darkest week of our Christian tradition, let us go deeper – take the time to prayerfully identify an area within your own life where you recognize the need for God's healing, God's restoration, God's gift of freedom. And be ready and open to experience God's wondrous transforming work in and through you. May we walk together as disciples through this week of sorrow and then into the brilliant light of life. Amen.

Let us pray:

We thank you, God, for sending Jesus to show us the way. We thank you for his model of discipleship, but mostly we thank you for his presence; for the many dimensions in which his words and ways speak to our weariness; for his face shining serious, sad, and exuberant; for his tender acceptance of our deepest pains; and for his pleasure in our highest joys. Empower our lives, transform our lives, help us to go deep, infuse us with your courage and determination. Help each of us discover new ways of discipleship – and, dear God, help us to love you more. In Jesus' name. Amen.