



WHY JUDAS MISSED EASTER – PART ONE

John 13:1-5, 18-30

Every year during our Maundy Thursday service comes the dramatic moment when we break the Judas Candle portraying his betrayal of Jesus Christ. Our own Mike Burkhart calls it “the breaking of the black candle service.” Blackness in that setting represents – darkness – a force that is opposed to the kingdom of God – which is portrayed as the kingdom of light. Jesus made the bold declaration “I am the Light of the world,” in **John 8:12**.

The 12 disciples make for an interesting study in and of themselves. The 12 disciples are as up-to-date as the morning newspaper or Internet headlines. We are more alike than different from our spiritual ancestors. The disciple Judas Iscariot is also a vital part of our spiritual edification in our journey of faith along with the others.

Today and on **April 20th** I want to share with you for a few moments about Judas Iscariot – and why he missed the Easter message and the power and purpose of the resurrection. The time after Easter in which Jesus ministered to the other 11 disciples who fled and deserted him as well – is an appropriate time for us 21st century disciples to do so.

As we learned from our first lesson today Judas was a man of enormous talent and potential. He is not the scum-of-the-earth person many preachers have made him out to be. Remember, as St. Augustine clearly taught: “Evil begins in our higher nature – not our lower nature.” It is our pride – our desire to dictate to God – to build our own ‘little empire’ – rather than the kingdom of God. That leads us astray.

Did you know that before the tragic moments in the upper room and garden this name Judas was a name of great honor in Israel? The national hero among the Jewish people was a man named Judas Maccabeus. He was a famous freedom fighter who stood against the foreign power and enemies of Israel. Many sons in Jesus’ day were named Judas either as the first name or middle name. Did you know that one of the other disciples – Thaddeus – was Bar-mitzvahed Judas by his parents? Somehow that other part of his name was strategically omitted after this legacy of betrayal. How many Americans name their children **Benedict Arnold**?

The name **Judas** meant **'Praise.'** When the parents of a newborn child saw that their prayers for a male heir had been granted – it was natural for them to say, "Praise God. We shall call him Praise of Judas." When you steal a person's good name – you have stolen everything. However, today the name carries with it a stigma of dishonor and betrayal. In my 31 years of ministry – I have never baptized a baby boy with the name of Judas. Only one heavy metal satanic rock group ever used the name with intentionality.

Judas had been raised in the very strict traditions of the Jewish law. He had learned the importance of the private and public worship of God.

Judas had a deep love for his nation – Israel. There is evidence that Judas and his family belonged to a group known as the Zealots. Another disciple – Simon – belonged to this very nationalistic, revolutionary group. They despised the iron grip of the Roman Empire – and longed for the day when Israel would be restored to prominence. They would resort to any measures to accomplish this.

We know that when Jesus called the disciples he asked them to sell what they had and follow him. However, we know that the disciples had to eat and on occasion provide for the physical necessities of life. So they pooled their resources into what we would call a common purse. It was Judas who was chosen to be the treasurer for the group because he was the most trusted. To be the treasurer of a local church is a great honor. I tell Laverne – our treasurer – there is a special place in heaven for church treasurers. There isn't a lot of evidence that Judas ever **'cooked the books'** so to speak. In fact because he was frugal he got upset when expensive perfume was used to anoint the feet of Jesus. However, I believe that was a smoke screen for a far deeper spiritual problem that was revealed by his actions.

There is an Episcopal Bishop by the name of Bishop Spong who believes Judas was invented by the early church leaders. They needed a scapegoat – someone to blame. However, Bishop Spong's thinking just doesn't hold up.

We live in an age where we have discounted or tried to explain away the power of evil. Some of our modern theological thoughts do not take seriously our perversity to evil. There is a reason we pray the petition in 'The Lord's Prayer' "Deliver us from evil." A distinguished theologian once shared "Since the primary motive of evil is disguise – one of the places evil people are most likely to be found is within the church and religious organizations."

Every one of us sitting in this church today has known and felt the power of betrayal – and maybe have even been the betrayer to someone else.

So today I want to share with you 5 reasons offered by scholars and Bible teachers down through the ages on why Judas betrayed Jesus.

FIRST, IT WAS DONE FOR THE MONEY.¹

It has been suggested that Judas was captured by and yielded to his first love – the love of money. I don't think so. Since Judas was so financially gifted and clever – he could have negotiated far more than 30 pieces of silver. We know from the biblical record in **Matthew 27:3-6** that Judas returned the money – threw it into the Temple – and expressed remorse to the Chief Priests. They could care less about Judas and remorse. They had used Judas for their own evil purposes. Unfortunately Judas hung himself after that. He thought what he did was unforgivable. That was his greatest error – as I will show later.

So money was **not** the cause of his betrayal. It was his misguided religious ambition and pride.

Judas could have been a tax collector like Matthew or Zacchaeus if money was his goal. Remember in **John 12:1-8** when Mary anointed his feet with the expensive perfume? It was not the money that upset him. It was Judas' recognition that he did not love Jesus with the same devotion as Mary did – and could not accept that Jesus the Messiah was going to die in Jerusalem.

SECONDLY, SOME BELIEVED HE REALLY WAS A SPY FROM CAESAR'S HOUSEHOLD.

They thought he was planted there by the religious and political authorities of the day. We know from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry that the religious and political leaders were concerned about his popularity. His teaching and miracles drew large crowds.

With this concern they planted Judas to betray Jesus at just the right moment. Perhaps they could nip the movement in its beginning stages. However, I believe Judas had deep feelings against the Roman Empire and what it had done to his people. Also, Judas had given too many moments of loyal service to act in harmony with Roman officials for such an extended period of time.

Most importantly, Jesus issued the invitation to discipleship to Judas – not Caesar or Caiaphas, the High Priest.

THIRDLY, SOME CLAIM THAT IT WAS PREDETERMINED THAT JUDAS SHOULD BE THE TRAITOR.

First of all – the Bible makes it clear that **all** the disciples fled and went into hiding behind locked doors – or took the fast track out of Jerusalem to Emmaus. Everyone betrayed Jesus. All the disciples were under satanic attack. Wherever there is opportunity – there is always opposition.

Let us quickly turn to **Matthew 16:21-23**. In this portion of God's word – Jesus shared with **all** his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, and die. It is Peter who objects to this kind of thinking. He even takes our Lord aside and tells Jesus so. Jesus responded by saying, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. You don't have in mind the things of God – but the things of man.” It is how Peter responds to our Lord's rebuke of him that makes the difference between Judas and Peter.

When Beth and I read and prayed our way through Mark's gospel on Good Friday – it is Peter again – who denies our Lord 3 times.

Perhaps it is my Wesleyan heritage – but if Judas had no choice in his life's direction – then you cannot hold Judas morally responsible for his actions.

Let us quickly turn to **John 13:26**. In the culture of Jesus' day – the host of a banquet – and Jesus was the host at the Passover meal – customarily took a piece of bread – dipped it – and presented it to the guest of honor. Here is our Lord – in a tender moment of love – reaching out to Judas and his hardened heart. I draw great consolation in knowing that the God you and I serve and honor is a great God – who goes to great lengths to save and redeem us. If Judas is in hell – where I believe he is – it is because of his actions – not our Lord's. It is God's will that none should perish.

FOURTHLY, SOME SCHOLARS BELIEVE IT WAS A MISGUIDED POLITICAL STRATEGY ON JUDAS' PART.

Judas was getting desperate to rid the Jewish nation of the oppression of the Roman Empire. If only he could force the issue to bring a showdown between Jesus and the Roman government. Surely Jesus would use the enormous power Judas had witnessed in the healing of the lepers, the feeding of the 5,000, the stilling of the storm and countless other actions. He wanted to force the hand of Jesus to act in a decisive way. However, Jesus used his hands to turn over tables in the Temple, wash the feet of his disciples, and celebrate the Passover feast. What a disappointment for Judas!

Judas failed to recognize that this king was king of all the world – which included the Roman Empire and also Gentiles and Samaritans. There is a grave danger when you try to baptize your political convictions into the Christian faith.

You soon realize that the platform of the kingdom of God is greater and larger than all of them. Judas had failed to recognize that you cannot divorce the Jesus truth – from the Jesus Way – and the Jesus life. Christians can and should be involved in the political process – but our highest and greatest loyalty is to Christ and not Caesar. It is the hill at Calvary – and not Capitol Hill in Washington, D. C. – that demands and deserves our soul, our life, our all. Jesus came to bring us into a dynamic relationship with the living God.

FIFTHLY, JUDAS ACTED OUT OF FEAR – NOT FAITH.

We know from the Palm Sunday records that great excitement and electricity was in the air. They thought they had a “winner.” Like I have shared in many Palm Sunday sermons, they had a ‘mistaken identity’ of the true nature of the ministry and mission of the Messiah. Jesus had created a great stir when he confronted the religious establishment and their corrupt system at the Temple – and overturned the tables. Jesus was the true zealot. He had **zeal** for the house of God and its grand purpose. It is easy to ‘worship what we use and use what we worship.’ Jesus did not plot his course on the basis of popularity and polls – but unfortunately Judas and church leadership sometimes do.

Judas could see and feel the tide of the Gallup polls quietly fading. The hosannas were fading – and he knew it. Judas was simply overwhelmed by it and saw the opportunity for his agenda slipping away. He was forced to play his hand – and unfortunately made a series of poor decisions from which he never allowed himself to recover.

Two weeks from now I am going to share 3 reasons why Judas missed Easter.

I close today with this story of 2 Jewish mothers.

Long, long ago, or so I’ve been told,
Two saints, they met on the streets paved with gold.
“By the stars in your crown,” said the one to the other,
“I see that on earth you, too, were a mother.
And by the blue tinted halo, I see that you wear,
You, too, have known sorrow and deepest despair.”
“Ah, yes,” came the answer, “I once had a son.
A sweet little lad, full of laughter and fun.”
“But, tell of your child!”
“Oh, I knew I was blest,
The first moment I held Him, close to my breast;
And my heart almost burst with the joy of that day.”
“Ah, yes,” sighed the other, “I felt the same way.”
The former continued, “The first steps he took—
So eager and breathless – the sweet startled look
Which came over his face – he trusted me so.”
“Ah, yes,” sighed the other, “how well do I know.”
“But soon he had grown to a bright handsome boy,
So stalwart and kind, and it gave me such joy
To have him just walk down the street by my side.”
“Ah, yes,” sighed the other, “I felt the same pride.”
“How often I shielded and spared him from pain,
And when He for others was so cruelly slain,

When they crucified Him and spat in His face,
I would have gladly taken His place!"
A moment of silence, "Oh, then you are she?
The Mother of Christ!" and she fell on one knee.
But the blessed one raised her and drew her so near
And kissed from the face of the woman, a tear.
"Please tell me the name of the son you loved so,
That I may share, your grief and your woe!"
She lifted her eyes, looking straight at the other,
"He was Judas Iscariot, and I am his Mother."²

Two Jewish mothers – two Jewish sons. Two different life directions. Be very careful which way you go.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ I am indebted to a printed sermon by Dr. James W. Moore for the outline shared in this sermon – however, Dr. Moore should not be held accountable for the way I used them.

² Thanks to King Duncan of Knoxville, Tennessee for this story that he received from an Internet friend. The source of this story is unknown.