

Acts 1:15-26: Back To Twelve

Introduction:

Friends!

We're back in Acts today, and we'll watch as the Apostles go back to their original number. We're going to see two really different stories cleverly interwoven today. We'll be reminded of someone the Church has never forgotten, and see how Peter leads this small group of Jesus' followers before the Spirit comes upon them all. Let's pray, first!

Prayer:

Widest View:

There really are two stories in today's passage. The event at hand, which Peter is guiding, and the story that stands behind it, which Luke gives to us almost as an aside.

Peter is leading a replacement of Judas, one of the original "twelve apostles," and Peter believes this replacement has to happen because of some Psalms we quotes, which he understands as mandating Judas' replacement. In order for us to make sense of what's

going on, though, Luke reminds us of who Judas was.

Let's talk about who Judas was.

On Judas:

If we were to go back into Luke's Gospel, his first book to Theophilus, we'd read this in chapter 22:

22 Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, 2 and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. 3 Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. 4 And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. 5 They were delighted and agreed to give him money. 6 He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

What we're never given in Luke, or anywhere, really, is what motivated Judas' betrayal. All Luke says is "Satan entered him," which could definitely mean some sort of demonic possession, or could be simply a way of

describing how completely evil this thing that Judas does really is. Your perspective on this depends on how seriously you take the Spiritual enemy that Jesus triumphed over, and probably on whether you see metaphors as truthful and important or don't think much about them at all. And Judas' motivation gets talked about endlessly, still.

His title is "Iscaiot," which may point to his partnership in a group of so called *Sicarii*, the greek word for "dagger-men." They were sort of assassin-revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow Rome violently the way the Israelite Maccabees had overthrown Greece generations before. This sounds good, because then we can chalk Judas' actions up to impatience and a "get 'er done" attitude. Maybe Luke mentions them here. But it's unclear how early this group got started. "Iscaiot" may simply point to the town or region he or his father was from, somewhere in Judea.

From John's Gospel, we know that Judas was the one who kept the money, and in Matthew and Mark especially, he seems motivated by money--he sells Jesus out because he wants the cash, you know? We know from other passages that he's oriented toward,

let's say, fiscal responsibility rather than irresponsible generosity. That's like many of us, though, so maybe it isn't a character flaw so much as, oh, a disposition away from risk. And if following Jesus is anything, it's risky. Maybe Judas just got tired of how unstable life following Messiah seemed to be.

We don't know what motivates Judas. But we know he acts. He sells Jesus out. Leads a group of Temple Police Officers, Elders, Chief Priests to Jesus, and really initiates the crucifixion.

Judas' End:

Luke, in today's passage, tells us what happened to Judas in the end.

“Now, this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong [or “swelling up,” as it could possibly be translated], he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.”

Everyone in Jerusalem learns about this, and the field itself, the plot, gets called “Field of Blood.”

The traditional understanding of this--and Matthew

says it explicitly--is that Judas hung himself, and hanging there, bloating, he eventually fell. Matthew, too, has a scene Luke ignores, in which Judas returns what he was paid for Jesus' betrayal--30 pieces of silver--and proclaims "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." In this case, the field wasn't bought by Judas, but by the Priests themselves with the same money they gave him. The field was used as a burial ground for immigrants, and uninhabited. We could talk about the differences here, but we won't.

The long and short of all this though, is that Judas betrayed Jesus for a price, and ended up committing suicide afterward.

Regarding Betrayals:

Thirty pieces of silver doesn't sound like much, does it? And we don't know exactly how much this was worth, but it bought a field, right? A lot. "Bought a place," works, too. One translation puts it "homestead," which is poetic, but a stretch.

We can tend to scoff at 30 silver coins, at how small Judas got for selling out the Son of God, all Humanity's redemption. Even if it could buy a city plot with a tree on it, which is something...it still seems so little.

I wonder what it would take for us to betray someone into the hands of those who might--who probably--would kill them? What if it was enough to buy a modest size house in a neighborhood with good schools? What if there was enough to pay your taxes forever, too?

Betrayals are cheap. They almost always are. If you're willing to betray someone, you're willing to do it for little, not much; It's in the nature of the thing. When someone hypothetically asks--literally playing Devil's advocate--what would it take for you to betray someone, murder someone, and lists out this amount or that, it's a yes or no from the get-go, right? And if it's a yes at 30 pieces of silver, at a 150 grand, it's probably a yes at 5 pieces, at 25 grand. As long as it's cash money. There's a point at which, I'd expect, someone just can't be bothered to get out of their chair and betray another person, but I don't think it's out of moral reluctance.

We've probably never betrayed people for money, especially in a way that has ended up in their death. We've probably never thought of ourselves as betrayers at all, people who sell others out for some

benefit to ourselves.

Regarding Betrayers:

But we will gossip about someone if it will earn us the esteem of others. We tell jokes at another person's expense if it will mean that whoever is in front of us finds us funny. If someone has told us a secret, we may not tell it--but we'll let people around us know that we know it, so that they're impressed. We'll throw people under the bus--or nudge them toward it in the eyes of our supervisors--if it means that we won't share in blame because of bad decisions made. We'll deflect blame anywhere but ourselves, really, to any innocent person we can see--or, someone not innocent, but more innocent than we are. Many of our failures are someone else's fault--even if the someone else is a slow driver, or a faceless politician, or a friend of family member we haven't seen in awhile.

We are often betrayers, sell-outs. Not for cash, but for the esteem and honor of others. We are. If we can't own this, at least a little, then there's not much point in me continuing, I guess. But let's pretend to own it: that we do what Judas does, maybe not at the same depths and not for the same payoff, but with the same self-interest guiding us, and the same hope for some

profit to come our way, even if it's fleeting and cheap.

A Captivating Contrast?

And one reason I think we find Judas so captivating is because of how deeply his choices contrast with Jesus' own.

Judas is interested in what he can gain for himself from his special relationship with Jesus. Jesus, who has a special relationship with God the Father is interested in what he can get for others, not himself.

Judas kills himself because he never really understood God's faithfulness, how even his betrayal could be forgiven in God's love. Jesus lets himself be killed, trusting God's faithfulness to raise him from the dead.

Jesus has "no place to lay his head," as he puts it, and redeems all humanity--buys us back--through his death. Judas sells him out for a plot of land, a homestead.

Monetizing People:

Fundamentally, Judas treats Jesus like a piece of property. Judas sells him out, literally sells him.

Judas monetize's his relationship with Jesus. Does this make sense? He discovers what his access to Jesus is worth, and how much he can sell that access for.

And that's not unusual in this world, right? Because people are worth something, and if we can turn their worth into money we can get for ourselves, then we've just got more money. And "more money" is a moral good as far as the world is concerned.

Those in this world who have the ability to commodify their relationships with others to their own benefit, and do it, are the ones who are most like Judas.

What's a Person Worth?

I've been thinking about what people are worth, lately.

We people are worth something, you know? In the eyes of the world, I mean, worth some sum of money. Whole industries are built on this.

How we live and the choices we make--choices tracked and logged and sifted--are worth something to every marketing company that exists. Slavery--what we call Human Trafficking these days--is fundamentally based on the idea that some people can buy and sell other people as property. Prostitution is cut from the same

cloth. Even things that many people argue are virtuous--overseas adoption, surrogacy pregnancies, child tax credits, and every single insurance payout--rest on this idea that we can figure out what a person is worth, monetize another person, and pay for them or be paid for them. Parents who treat their children as a means to sympathy or attention are more Judas-like than Jesus-like, in that action.

So what is a person worth? I mean, really? Are some of us worth more than others? How many Judas' is a Peter or a Mary worth? Prostitutes can cost a fortune or almost nothing, and either way those who are bought have to hand the money over to someone who controls them. Too many of us, male and female, have gone online and for almost nothing dallied around with images that at their base are about turning a person into an object, property that for a moment is ours, and used for our self-interested release.

But if we believe all the things that the Bible says about who we are to God, how valuable we are to God, loved by God, worth God's attention and interest and care and all the rest, then we realize how ridiculous it is to ask what people are worth. They're worth everything, always.

Asking Anyway:

Judas wasn't just Jesus' betrayer. He's the patron saint of everyone who, for whatever reason--basic self-interest or greed or disenchantment or hurt feelings or ignorance--treat other people as property to be used for their own gain. To a Judas-like person, "someones" turn into "somethings," and we do what we will with them for our own good.

And it should be obvious, since we contrasted the two of them, but for people who are meant to become like Jesus, we aren't supposed to be acting like Judas. We aren't supposed to use what we know about people--whether that's their routines, or their secrets, their quirks, their fears, their cash or their connections--for our good, our gain, our compensation.

We aren't supposed to evaluate others around us, and try to figure out what knowing them can do for us or get for us. That's not what relationships are for, that's not what people are for.

We are members of a New Covenant. God's Law is written on our hearts. The Holy Spirit is alive in us, and we have the power and inclination to reject the way of

Judas, because we “know the Lord.”

Using Up Christ:

And this is significant, because I do think there is one person we are meant to use, to consume. At least metaphorically. It's Jesus, of course. We could maybe say that this is part of what it means to come to Jesus as a little child, because if a little child is anything, it's a user, right? At the end of the day, a child considers the adults in her or life from an utterly selfish, but innocently so, stand point: The adults are people who they can make use of, who can give them things. Metaphors can be stretched too far, but it is also true that young children literally consume their mothers, are fed by their mothers.

Jesus is safe for us to need. Christianity is, maybe, a culture of consumption, in that we all metaphorically consume Jesus. Everyone of us uses Jesus more than we'd be willing to lay out there. We take the Son of God for granted, take for granted all that he's given us, and we treat our salvation and God's promises as, oh, signs that we can demand even more for ourselves from Jesus. Consider just our prayers: How many are for ourselves, and our immediate wants, rather than the many needs around us?

And I don't think this is wrong. It's not complete, of course, not the fullest picture of what we're called to be. But I wonder if maybe, until Jesus returns and resurrection comes all over the world, we can't help but be users. And maybe Jesus is the one safe place where even our selfishness can be turned into something good, or at least be kept from harming others and turning them into property to be used or used up at will. Maybe Jesus undoes consuming people, using them, evaluating and appraising them, by inviting us to consume him, use him, appraise him. I think he knows that he can't be used up, and can take it. He remakes our habit of turning people into property into something that causes us to worship and love him even more as we realize the depth of his clever grace, and love.

And the sad reality of the Judas story is that he didn't let himself live long enough to experience that grace in this life. If he understood what Jesus said about the New Covenant, he forgot the last line: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." He killed himself, took his own life before Jesus could take his shame away from him. I fully believe--based on nothing but Jesus' character--that if he had simply

waited a little while longer, and met Jesus raised from the dead, he would have experienced all the mercy, and healing, and forgiveness, and renewal that so many of us have experienced. But that's all conjecture.

Backing Away From Judas:

In today's passage, all we see is Peter, deciding, based on his reading of Scripture, that Judas ought to be replaced. If this scene has ever been close to coming up when I've been around, you might know that I disagree with this move. A long time ago someone someplace or something I read persuaded me that Peter made the wrong move here. He didn't have the Spirit yet. He acted instead of waiting, in some leadership way, and went to fill this empty spot, this "twelfth apostle" when, as Luke seems to show, Paul was the one who God intended to be this "twelfth," if that way of thinking was even in play.

We don't hear from Matthias at all, and history has him alternatively being stoned to death in Jerusalem, or dying of old age, having brought Jesus' message to, maybe, Ethiopia, or some other places. Matthias isn't chosen by Jesus, as all the other apostles were, as even Paul was. But he's chosen by lot, in between

Jesus' ascension and the Spirit's baptism.

The lot, which is used to choose him, was sort of like drawing straws that you'd prayed over beforehand. But it's on its way out, even as the eleven apostles do this, because the Holy Spirit is coming along, and there simply seems to be no real reason to have this game of chance, roll of the dice, after the Spirit appears. We'll read more about that in Acts 15.

So I'm in the camp, no matter how small it might be, that Peter shouldn't have rushed into this, and should have waited for Paul to be chosen, as Jesus chooses him in Chapter 9 of Acts. In fact, I've come to feel, in some ways, that Peter ironically treats whoever ends up filling this empty spot in a way similar to how Judas treats people, just means to an end.

But if you disagree, that's totally fine. It really is. For Peter, this was a way to return to the Twelve, and he thought he was doing what Scripture prophesied he should do. And, if we're familiar with Peter's life, this isn't a surprise, really. He wasn't one to stay still if acting was an option. What is amazing is the change that comes over him after the Spirit arrives, which we'll see soon. For Peter, he was trying to set things in

order, make use of the time while he waited, and I can't deny his efforts.

Lessons From Peter:

And because Peter is the star of this story, let me offer a couple of Peter-specific things. First of all, if we're going to make decisions, even if they're roll of the dice decisions, which I can't really recommend, let's at least pray about them beforehand, and ask God to make them the best decisions they can be. This is a good example Peter sets for us.

And if we're going to allow our lives to be guided by Scripture, as Peter is trying to do here, let's ensure that we test our interpretation of some passage by the Spirit, since we've got the Spirit, and run it past other Christians who also do, just to be sure we're not making decisions based on poor understandings of what the Bible asks of us. Bad Bible application is something we should avoid.

But let's return to Judas, even though he stands behind what happens today, and consider a couple of lessons we can learn from him.

Lessons From Judas: Be Frank With Needs &

Offers:

We can keep in mind that a real community offers a thousand opportunities for leveraging someone else for our gain. We know how each other act and react, we know the wealth or poverty of one another, we know the secrets, the foibles, the quirks, sins, and hopes of each other. And there will always be opportunities to manipulate each other for our gain or tease each other for our ego or use each other for our agendas. This is only more true, maybe, in our families.

I think the quickest way around this is to speak the truth in love, and to say directly what we need from someone and what we can offer someone. Our lives will always be full of great need and self-interest; if we are frank about these needs and help others as they share of theirs, we'll side-step enormous congregational problems. And once we practice this enough here, where it can be safe, we'll begin to do it elsewhere, too, and that'll be great.

Lessons From Judas:***Remembering What Judas Forgot***

Rejecting the way of Judas also means that we remember what he forgot. Judas failed, and did so

enormously. We know that. But he forgot Jesus' character, and God's grace embodied in him. We can't forget it, because we may fail. It's hard not to think about what you can get out of life, or others. It's hard not to betray people or their trust in even little ways. We can't kill ourselves when we do. There'd be none of us left. But let's turn to the one who always gives us more help when we need it, and in our persistence, triumph over that part of us that would consume each other.

In the end, of course, this is just an in-between passage, still really setting us up for what's to come. 120 followers of Jesus are gathered together, waiting. Luke reminds us of those we need to remember, those whose examples can be positive or negative, but were ones God loved and Jesus chose to be with. We're invited to consider who we're with, what we want of them, and why, even as we try to mimic Jesus' example above all others. We can do it.