

Judas Did A Bad, Bad Thing

Matthew 26:1-16; John 12:1-8

Trey Davis

Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh

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The Christian calendar is full of dates that are at least a little tricky to understand. I've awaited epiphanies on Epiphany but instead only been beset by the sadness of taking down Christmas. I've attended Shrove Tuesday pancake suppers and tried to make sense of how syrup and butter were supposed to be reverent. I have pretty much never thought twice about Ascension Day, which always occurs on a Thursday and therefore slips past unnoticed between Easter and Pentecost. And, speaking of Pentecost, I have never understood why it gets its own liturgical color—red—when nothing else does. We also have numerous days that I couldn't really tell you anything about, including Annunciation Day, Candlemas, and Corpus Christi (not just a city in Texas, apparently).¹

But the most confusing day in the Christian calendar, I'd argue, is Palm Sunday, today. The season of Lent has been progressing toward Easter for almost six weeks, nearly forty days of giving things up and reflecting on our own humanity, ready to culminate in the dark of Gethsemane and the mourning of the crucifixion before bursting forth with the joy of Easter...and then, right before we get there, we have a day celebrating Jesus' triumphant arrival into Jerusalem. It totally disrupts the flow of Lent and its march toward Easter.

It's hard to put too much stock into the celebration of Palm Sunday. Even as we wave palm branches and sing hosannas this morning, we remember that Jesus' Palm Sunday triumph was short-lived. This day is so confused that the Revised Common Lectionary—the guide some churches use to organize their scripture readings week to week—lists two completely separate sets of readings for this day, one called the "Liturgy of the Palms" and one called the "Liturgy of the Passion," because it is so incredibly difficult to synthesize the emotions and emphases that are wrapped into this day.²

Perhaps, then, it's good that today we are turning our attention to the character of Judas, because he is the disciple who also is the hardest to understand, the one who seems to have split emotions and motivations in all that he does.

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We have to work to make sense of Judas. He is, obviously, one of the Twelve, one whom Jesus has hand-picked to follow him and learn from him. He is also someone who has chosen to follow Jesus, dedicating years to an itinerant lifestyle with few possessions or luxuries. We, as churchgoers, would like to think that after three years at least some of Jesus' teaching has worn off a little on Judas, that Judas has embraced the kindness and selflessness and grace that Jesus has repeatedly accentuated. At the same time, we can't deny that Judas turns on Jesus. His betrayal is ironclad, with no room to wiggle free from it or explain it away. Judas did a bad, bad thing.

¹ You can read more about these holidays here: <https://christianity.org.uk/article/the-christian-calendar>.

² <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=C&season=Lent>

Depending on the interpretation, the story of the anointing at Bethany presents both of these aspects of Judas, both his desire to abide by Jesus' teaching and his inescapable fatal flaw. It is a passage that appears—in slightly different versions—in all four gospels; today we read the versions in Matthew and in John. The two versions are mostly similar. They occur during the final days of Jesus' life, and the events within each are basically the same: there is a woman who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume, the disciples balk at this action, and Jesus rebukes. But John includes details—so many details—that Matthew omits, and this leads to a markedly different understanding of Judas.

It's the same story, but it's not the same Judas.

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When Jennifer and I were in college, we acted in a campus performance of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. The guy who played Jesus was nice enough, but he mostly kept to himself and didn't really connect with the rest of the cast. But the guy who played Judas was incredibly friendly and warm and gregarious, and everyone was rooting for him to find success in musical theatre after graduation.³ The play itself is also pretty kind toward Judas, something that has drawn some controversy and criticism over the years.

The result is that, at the end of the play, I think we all felt some sympathy for Judas—I did, at least. He came off as this man who listened when Jesus said “feed the hungry and give to the poor,” then tried to do these things and got beat down for it, and then didn't know where to turn. The Judas of this musical is someone with a good heart who gets frustrated and slips up in his frustration.

This is a far cry from the Judas in the gospel of John. Here we have a man cold and indifferent to Jesus, to his teachings, and to the poor. John carefully paints Judas—only Judas, not the other disciples—as someone who is fixated on money, who cares only about the opportunity to increase his wealth, and who is even willing to steal from the poor in order to achieve that end. This Judas names exactly what he thinks the perfume is worth, accentuating his affection for money. He could not care less about Jesus, nor does he seem particularly frustrated or like someone who slips up. Instead, he represents the opposite of Jesus, 180 degrees away from Christ. He is a greedy, deceitful, slimy schemer; unlikable, unrelatable, unbelievable.

Judas's uncaring and materialistic nature is particularly emphasized when contrasted against Mary. Mary—who is not a member of the wealthy elite—could also sell the perfume and live off of it for a year, but she does not. She pours it on Jesus' feet. She doesn't even think about the financial aspects of her decision; she simply wants to show her love for Jesus. In doing so, she embodies the ideal of selflessness...and Judas comes to embody selfishness. Unlike Andrew Lloyd Webber, John does not want us feeling any sympathy for Judas.

The Judas in the gospel of Matthew falls somewhere in between those two extremes. He is not as despised as the character in John, not the only voice to object to the anointing, and never described as greedy or a thief. Instead, we know only that Judas goes to the priests after the anointing and Jesus's rebuke. We don't know why, exactly, he goes, only that he does so and that he receives payment for his betrayal.

³ He's now an Episcopal priest.

It's worth noting that the payment he receives is essentially a pittance, a paltry sum.⁴ The modern day equivalent would have been somewhere between \$100 and \$400, hardly worth a man's life, much less worth the Messiah's.⁵ A truly greedy and scheming Judas would have wheedled for more. So either Judas is so incredibly blinded by money that he is willing to betray Christ for almost nothing, or he has a motivation that is different from wealth, something misguided but understandable, a man trying to do right but so lost that he ends up square in the wrong instead.

There is room in Matthew to interpret Judas this way, as a mostly good man who followed Christ but still slipped up. And while Matthew doesn't depict Judas as sympathetically as *Jesus Christ, Superstar* does, the first gospel does leave the door open for us to ponder why exactly Judas does what he does. The Judas of Matthew is believable as a disciple; the Judas of John feels like a double-agent who Jesus still went ahead and let into his inner circle. The truth, again, is probably somewhere in the big grey area that Matthew allows.

In that grey area, we are left with two possible Judases. One is a largely good man who simply doesn't understand Jesus, and one is a completely bad man who doesn't really love Jesus. But either way, we are left with one unassailable truth: whether Judas failed to understand or failed to love, he still took the situation into his own hands and betrayed the Messiah. Judas unquestionably did a bad, bad thing.

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If we look at the disciples as templates for our own lives, the questions from today's scriptures become even more gripping. Judas, Mary, and the disciples are no longer distant characters who lived millennia ago, people we study from afar. Instead, they become mirrors to help us see ourselves. At times, we may honestly see ourselves in Mary. We too have moments where we allow our love for Jesus to completely overwhelm our love for money, moments where we don't care what other people think about any actions we take that reflect our love for Jesus. In times like these, perhaps we come closest to understanding Jesus. We do live on the spectrum between Mary and Judas.

But we also live on the spectrum that exists within the character of Judas in these scriptures. Judas—all of the disciples, really, but especially Judas—forces us to contemplate who we are in the times that fail to understand Jesus and in the times that we fail to love Jesus.

It is relatively easy to admit that we fail to understand Jesus. There remains so much about the God-man who walked on Earth that transcends our logic, our science, and our experience. We want to believe, but deep down we keep asking the question "how." How did he feed the hungry without food or heal the sick without medicine? How did he die and rise again? How did he love so purely? We long to understand, but we also know—as people of faith—that we will never fully understand. And so we have faith, and so we're okay admitting that we fail to understand.

It is much, much harder to admit that we fail to love Jesus...but this, too, is true. We prioritize other goals or objects ahead of Jesus. We seek to protect ourselves rather than to open up. Like the Judas of John, we value money more than we should, even a small amount, a pittance compared to the love of Christ. We don't intend to fail to love...but, nevertheless, we do fail.

⁴ Boring, M. Eugene. "Matthew," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 8, 467.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_pieces_of_silver

And so we find ourselves in the same place as Judas. It almost doesn't matter whether we have failed to understand or failed to love. In the end, like Judas, we know that we have betrayed, that we have done bad, bad things. Our guilt is as irrefutable as his.

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The end of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* is—spoiler alert—really, really depressing. The final scene is the crucifixion itself, not the resurrection that we will celebrate next week. Lloyd Webber wrote an eerie, ghastly chorus of moaning to accompany the death of Jesus—appropriate for the crucifixion, but not ideal for the ending of a Broadway musical.

To counter that scene, the penultimate song is a funky, upbeat number featuring the deceased Judas dancing in heaven surrounded by groovy angels and continuing to ask questions of Jesus. The fact that this scene takes place in heaven, suggesting that Judas has been forgiven and welcomed into eternal bliss, is one of many reasons why the play has drawn criticism from some religious groups. But it raises another crucial question about Judas: did Jesus, in his grace and mercy, die for Judas's sins? Did Jesus save Judas?

Karl Barth, arguably the greatest theologian of the 20th century, tentatively argued that he did. Barth wrote that surely Jesus would have continued to love Judas, regardless of whether or not Judas loved or understood Jesus because that's how full and complete Jesus' love is. Barth says, essentially, "If Jesus came to save the lost, surely there is no one in the gospel story who is more lost than [Judas]."⁶ Barth admits that we don't know for sure—the scripture doesn't confirm one way or another—but he certainly leaves the door open for Judas's salvation.

Barth's is not a sympathetic view of Judas. He still characterizes Judas as the epitome of the lost. But it is, perhaps, a hopeful view. Even for the epitome of the lost, there is hope.

Knowing that we are somewhere on the spectrum from Judas to Mary, and knowing that far too often we are closer to Judas's end than we are to Mary's—whether that is the Judas who doesn't love or the Judas who doesn't understand—I certainly want to believe that Barth is right. Knowing that we all frequently exist in the land of the lost, I am comforted knowing that hope remains.

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This is where we find ourselves on Palm Sunday. We want to celebrate the triumph of Jesus, want to humble ourselves before him and give thanks and shout hosannas. We want to believe that we are part of the crowd of his followers, people who align themselves with his goodness and teachings and who are willing to make sacrifices for him. This is the crowd that welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem, and this (we contend) is us.

But we do not understand everything about this mysterious Messiah, even as we praise him and lower ourselves before him. It's certainly possible that we don't even understand most things about him. He is simply too much for us to comprehend.

⁶ Stroup, George W. "Theological Perspective on John 12:1-8." *Feasting On The Word, Year C, Volume 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 142.

And, despite the fact that we want to love him with all that we have, we come up short in our attempts to do this. We betray, and deny, and run away. We find ourselves not only in the sunny victory of Palm Sunday but also in the darkness of Gethsemane.

This is the confusion of Palm Sunday: we do celebrate, earnestly, the goodness of Christ, like Mary with her perfume or the crowd lining the streets. And we do consistently fall short of that goodness through ignorance or indulgence, like Judas and the mob that turns against Jesus. We cannot reckon our existence without acknowledging that it exists within these models, that no one lives on one end or the other, that we all do bad, bad things.

And yet, because Christ is who he is, there is hope. Hope for all of us, even for Judas.