

LOVING THE SERIOUS SINNER

Messy (Part 7) | Luke 23:33-46; Matthew 27:1-5

The Traitor On The Tree

Once, outside Jerusalem, there stood a tree. We don't know its shape or size. We don't know its exact location. But we do know that on one Friday, long ago, a remorseful man died in despair there. Matthew tells it like this:

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

The name of Judas has all but disappeared from polite company and conversation in our time. We don't name our dogs Judas, much less our children, though it once was a name both heroic and honored. Judas is simply the Greek form of the name "Judah," meaning "Praise God." The first famous Judas was one of the fathers of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. There was a Judas Maccabeus who, in 166 B.C. led a courageous revolt against the tyranny of Syria. The Book of Acts reports that there was a Judas of Galilee who died as a martyr in a rebellion against Rome when Christ was just a child.¹ At the end of chapter 13 of his gospel, Matthew tells us that Jesus even had a cousin or brother named Judas.² What I'm trying to emphasize is that, in the first century AD, parents were **proud** to name their child, **Judas**.

But no longer. Now "**Judas**" is a name of shame. Most of us associate it with degraded character, with backstabbing and greed, with those who wear a mask of virtue that conceals a soul of scum. We reserve the term, Judas, for mothers who abandon their kids and government officials who betray their country. Judas is what we call fat cats who plunder pension plans and fathers who abuse children. The name Judas gets applied to the sort of people who smile at a flight attendant while fingering the box-cutter in their pocket; or the kind of slime who'd sell for silver a man who'd been a cherished friend. It's hard to even say the name "Judas" without a sneer of disgust, isn't it? When we picture him swinging on that tree, we forgive ourselves for feeling some sense of satisfaction that he's gotten his just deserts. We might find it in our heart to demonstrate some form of love to a variety of imperfect people but not a "Judas." Why? Because Judas is a **SERIOUS SINNER**, one of those people we don't feel any obligation to love, people who often seem beyond the reach of grace.

Being Human

It's interesting how seldom we think of ourselves as a Judas. Few of us conceive of ourselves as "serious sinners." When I've had to let a long-time employee go; or when, for the sake of my work, I've cheated my family out of the care I've promised, I don't think of that as betrayal; it's just grim necessity. When we cheat on the tithe or the tax return of the King or country to which we've pledged allegiance, we don't consider that being a traitor; it's just trying to get by. When we flip past the segment on starving children to get to a happier program, that's not being a Judas to the human family; it's just managing our stress. When we fantasize about a person who's not our spouse or talk trash about someone made in God's image, that's not betrayal of a sacred trust; it's just being human.

The complex truth is that we are more like Judas than we daily imagine. In the pursuit of righteous causes, we deeply wound others. In the effort to provide for ourselves or our families we take more at times from the common purse of God's resource than we probably have a right to. We mortgage our soul for things that glitter. We kiss and tell, or cheat and don't. We push people we love against the wall (as Judas did with Jesus) perhaps telling ourselves, too, that we need to go brutally hard on them to make them step up to their capabilities. We become momentary vessels of evil and make decisions that result in the literal or emotional death of others and don't even realize it.

And this may also be where we are most unlike Judas. You see, there came a time when he fully realized what he had done. There came a moment when the full weight of his choices came crashing down around the ears of his soul. **I have sinned...** he said. **I have betrayed innocent blood... Seized with remorse... (Matthew 27:3-4)** the Bible says, Judas wanted to take it all back. He went to the chief priests and elders. He gave back the silver and desperately sought to stop the dominoes of his decisions from falling. But, as repentant as he was, he found nothing but law to meet his remorse. **What is [your remorse] to us?"** the religious people said: You've done what you've done. **It's your responsibility. (Matthew 27:4)** And utterly convinced that his failures were final they also became fatal. Judas' only hope seemed to lie in a rope swinging from a tree.

The Savior on the Tree

You probably don't hear many sermons expressing sympathy for the devil that was Judas, do you? We are gentler with Peter – though Jesus once said he was Satan's vessel too (Matt 16:23). We go lighter on the other disciples, though they each had their role in the course of the crucifixion. I think that if we can zero in on Judas as an unusually serious sinner... If we can caricature Judas... it is easier to keep thinking we're nothing like him. We forget that if left to take full responsibility for our sins, we would **all** be the **sons [and daughters] of perdition (John 17:12)**, as the Bible describes Judas. In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul emphasizes that: **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)** and **the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)**. In other words, if you and I could see ourselves in light of real

holiness -- of true accountability before the law of God -- we might go looking for a tree as well.

I just pray it would be a DIFFERENT TREE than Judas chose. You see, outside of Jerusalem there stood another "tree," of sorts. And a certain Man hung on that one too. In a sense, I suppose, you could say WE hung Him on it. It was our human family who tortured, and tacked, and taunted Him there. It was our betrayal of God's love that led to the necessity of that Cross. But we need to be clear that these things were simply the means not the cause of His death. Jesus did not die on this day long ago because Judas or anyone else forced Him to the Cross. Jesus said He chose to go there. **No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. (John 10:18)**

Why did Jesus make that choice? That is the question that rings down the ages, still rattling the cups and plates at this remarkable supper table. The answer is profoundly simple and simply profound: It was so that no one would ever need to climb Judas' tree again. As I've been trying to say today, most of us would never even think of doing so. We don't yet begin to grasp our complicity in the tragic brokenness of our world. We keep trying to assign responsibility to that Judas or another Judas, never realizing that for every pointed finger, three more point back to us. This is precisely the sad and sweet significance of Christ's statement from the Tree of Calvary: **Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34)**

Those words are especially good news for those of us with silver coins still jangling in our pockets. They are amazing news for those of us fingering the rope because we've lost our hope that we could ever atone for the things we've done or failed to do. With a staggering LOVE we'll not understand fully till we stand face-to-face with Him one day and feel those nail-pierced arms wrapped around us forever, Jesus has taken responsibility for ALL our sin upon Himself. He has absorbed in His body ALL the agony of human sin and the death it breeds. He has overcome it ALL with redeeming grace.

Now Jesus invites us to come and take into ourselves something of this glory. He calls you and me to let go of our heavy loads and turn our eyes upon Him and absorb His grace into our bodies and person. If your name be Judas, let your voice cry out: "Praise God." If your name be I-Know-Not-What-I-Do, let your heart shout: "Praise God." For **I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Turn unto me and live! (Ezekiel 18:32)**

And if God is able to do that with you and me... If He who was a lamb without blemish, a soul without sin, a being of the highest holiness... If HE is able to will and work for the good of Serious Sinners... how does that influence the way we treat the very messy and messed-up people in our lives? Who do you need to forgive tonight? Whose pain, fear or brokenness do you need to stop avoiding but start moving toward (the way Jesus did with people) so they you will understand the needs of that person more deeply? Who do you need to rededicate your will to working for the good of? In other

words, having been to the Cross and come to this Table, with WHOM will you take up the challenge of loving like Jesus loves YOU?

Please pray with me...

Sovereign God, with sinners in every age and place we bow in humble awe before the great and gracious work you did upon that ancient Tree. What pains you knew, what cost you bore, we barely grasp still. But for that part we have been given the grace to see... for that reminder of your redeeming love upon which we come now to feed at this same table at which you once fed Judas and Peter and Mary – all we can say is: "Jesus, I am a Serious Sinner. But, praise God, what a Savior you are! Teach me to love others more like you have loved me. Amen."

¹ Acts 5:37

² Matthew 13:55