

THE EMPTY NICHE

Denying the Temptation to Betray Jesus

Text: Matthew 21:1-11; 26:14-16; 47-56

I

During Spring Break recently, my son Reed and I drove through upstate New York and passed close to the town of Saratoga. Saratoga is a lovely village today, a trendy spot where people come for horse-racing and spa-plunging. But back in the day, Saratoga was known for something with much higher stakes. It was there, upon a field nearby, that the last major battle of the American Revolution was fought.

Gone now is the smell of powder smoke, the cries of the fallen, and the shouts of victory. All that remains now to remind you of the decisive conflict that took place there is a great stone obelisk, rising 155 feet high against the backdrop of the Adirondack mountains. Cut into the base of each of the obelisk's four sides is a large niche bearing the name of one of the American generals who commanded so brilliantly there. And above each name rises a great bronze likeness of the hero seated on horseback.

In the first niche stands Horatio Gates; in the second, Philip John Schuyler; and in the third, Daniel Morgan. But as you walk around the corner to the fourth niche, you can't help but be struck with a colder feeling. The name of the general is there; but the statue is strangely absent. Conspicuously absent. As you read the name of that general who once commanded West Point, who once distinguished himself in battle at Lake Champlain, Quebec, and here at Saratoga, your mind wanders to that misty place along the Hudson River where that same man -- Benedict Arnold -- sold his soul to the enemy, eventually dying in poverty and disgrace. As Clarence Macartney once wrote: "The empty niche in that monument shall ever stand for fallen manhood, power prostituted, genius soiled, for faithlessness to a sacred trust."

What makes a titan like Arnold turn traitor to his country? For that matter, what makes a person turn from his or her first love of any kind today? After all, we can call cheating on someone we once promised to be faithful to merely "extra-marital exploration." We can refer to stealing from a company or country we once pledged our allegiance to merely "creative accounting." We can label lying to someone who trusts our word "telling a half-truth" or dub as mere "backsliding" our tendency to serve ourselves more fervently than the God we once claimed as Lord. But it all comes down to the same word in the end, doesn't it? And that word is "**BETRAYAL.**"

It's an uncomfortable word, isn't it? It's one reason why I think it's not all that

helpful to throw too many stones at the Benedict Arnolds of the world. It's not because they aren't distorted characters; it's just that it's never good luck or good sense to break mirrors. And I want to invite you to look into one of those mirrors with me today – to look closely at the story of Judas Iscariot, the most notorious traitor of all time. I think it's worth our time to do this, so that we'll see how easy it is for any of us to stumble, and so that we can start taking steps today to ensure that when our name is on the wall of history years from now, it won't be beneath an empty niche.

II

What is so shocking about what Judas did in the misty Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, is how loyal he must have seemed as he rode across the battlefield on Palm Sunday. We can't know for sure what was going through Judas' mind as he came through the gates of Jerusalem that day. We don't know for certain why Judas had followed Jesus in the first place. But it doesn't seem far-fetched to think that Judas might have been moved by the same sorts of interests that move US to make some of the commitments we make to people, organizations, or even God.

Maybe Judas was drawn by the PERKS. Think of the benefits that came with travelling in the company of a famous rabbi like Jesus. Most of the time, you got free shelter and food (maybe even donuts!). You got entrée to all sorts of interesting people. You got the admiration of others and, better yet, access to the common purse. John's Gospel tells us that all the monies given to support Jesus' ministry were kept in one account and Judas had been entrusted with the ATM card for it. John also tells us that Judas had secretly visited that ATM pretty often. He called it "borrowing." But it was probably a sign that Judas had a particularly large appetite for the perks of life.

If that was so, then you can be sure that by Palm Sunday, Judas was jonesing at the thought of what was to come. Think of all the perks that would come Judas' way when his second interest was fulfilled. You see, the Bible makes it clear that Judas was also driven toward Jesus by the potential for POWER. Judas was one of two disciples of Jesus who were Zealots. The Zealots were an extreme party dedicated to overthrowing Rome, by violence if necessary. There is good reason to think that Judas had seen in Jesus a kindred spirit gifted with the charisma to make the Zealot hopes of political revolution finally possible. After all, didn't Jesus say "**render unto Caesar only what is Caesar's and to God what is God's**"? (Matt 22:21) Did his parables not often speak of ejecting vile tenants from the Lord's land? Didn't Jesus plainly say that he "**came not to bring peace but a sword**"? (Matt 10:34)

And now, as Jesus rode through the gates of Jerusalem that Sunday, as he was greeted with hosannas and palm branches like military conquerors in Israel always had been, Judas must have thrilled at the thought of the great

revolution about to take place. If some of the other disciples were debating who would get the best seats in the coming new order (Matt 20:21), can you imagine what ambitious thoughts were running through the mind of this man for whom politics was a driving passion? What a great general or Secretary of State Judas would make when positions of authority were being handed out. Not only would he enjoy more privileges than ever before, he would finally be in a position to shape society as he knew it ought to be.

But, then, this congregation is packed with people who know how good it can be to have a position of influence. Sure, power brings certain perks with it as well, but that's not the only reason many of us want it. In our heart of hearts, most of us are moved by at least some righteous desire to leave this world better or brighter or more beautiful than when we entered it; and so, I bet, was Judas. If you think about it, along with a love for perks and power, there had to be a streak of idealistic PIETY in Judas too.

How else do we explain his decision to sign on with a rabbi or Jesus' decision to call him as a disciple even though he was the only one not from Galilee? If Judas did not at least seem to be filled with as much virtue as you and me, would the other disciples have put him in charge of the money purse? If he really was the obvious bad guy some paint him to be, then why is it that when Jesus says at the Last Supper, "**One of you will betray me**" (Matt 26:21) we never hear one of the disciples say: "Psst, I think it's Judas; he's always had shifty eyes." Instead, we're told that each one wondered if he himself would be the one (Matt 26:22).

III

The answer must be that Judas on Sunday or at that Supper was no easier to spot as a traitor than Benedict Arnold at Saratoga, or you and me in this room. The capacity to betray a sacred cause (or the most sacred one – Jesus) lies within every one of us; and for the same reason that overtook Judas. You see, there comes a moment when you figure out that Jesus is calling you to love him and his creatures more than your perks, your power, or your piety. And sometime between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday that realization, I believe, overwhelmed Judas with an intolerable fear.

Think about this. When you love the PERKS of privilege too much, aren't you going to be scared of continuing to follow Someone who makes it clear that he considers his own life (much less his comfort) worth surrendering to meet the needs of others? Why someone like that could ask me to trade in my expensive car, or change my vacation plans, or give up drinking so much so as to enable me to serve others. Yes he could.

And when your whole conception of POWER is wrapped up -- as Judas' was -- in the idea of putting yourself in a position of superior stature and influence,

aren't you going to be deeply afraid to follow after Someone who -- at the point where the crowd would make him king -- insists on stooping to wash the dirty feet of those not fit to tie his sandals? My Lord, that person might ask me to become a servant to that idiot at work, or to forgive that person who hurt me, or to spend less time advancing my own opinion and more time listening to others. Yes he might.

And when your understanding of PIETY involves a merely moderate effort to be a "good person" or hold "high ideals," aren't you going to be terrified of Someone who seems able to look across the dinner table at you and know your secret thoughts and deeds. Why, communing regularly with someone like that would force me to take a hard look at the stealing or cheating, the lying or lushing I've been allowing myself behind my virtuous mask. Why, someone like that would hold me accountable to really changing, wouldn't he? Yes he would.

Friends, can YOU bear to follow a Lord like that? Judas decided he couldn't. And so he turned him in for what seemed for the moment like a better deal. He betrayed Jesus for 30 silver pieces worth of perks. He sold out the Christ for a moment of false power, marked by swords and clubs and a mocking little kiss. Judas delivered the Savior of the world to his enemies, and received in return the seal of piety from priests who'd happily kill God to strengthen their version of religion. Is it any wonder that when he woke up and realized what he had done, he went out and hung himself?

IV

Are you heading for a similar conclusion? I don't mean that you'll go out and hang yourself; but is it possible that one day you are going to wake up and realize to your despair that you've slowly and subtly sold your soul to maintain passing perks, vain power, and superficial piety? If that's even a remote possibility for you, then please hear these two concluding thoughts.

FIRST, whatever treason you may have committed against God, another person, or even your own self, Jesus offers you a fresh start today. He doesn't want any empty niches. Did you notice what Jesus called Judas as the traitor approached him in the garden that night? He called him "**Friend.**" Do you remember how Jesus restored Peter fully, even after the fisherman betrayed him, arguably as badly as did Judas? He made him the Rock of the church. The point is, that even when we turn on God, he refuses to turn on us. The truth is that even Judas could have been forgiven and renewed if he had dared to believe in redeeming grace. Won't you?

Then SECONDLY, commit your life to pursuing better blessings than Judas was seeking. If you want PERKS that truly enrich you, forget trying to amass comforts and privileges for yourself. Instead live to bring life to others. To

paraphrase Jesus: those who live for themselves, die by themselves; but those who give themselves away enjoy riches of friendship, peace, and fulfillment no one can take away. Moreover, if you want genuine POWER in this life, take a moment to think about why Jesus didn't call down 12 legions of angels to defend him as he could have. Jesus knew that having power over others can't begin to exert the kind of transforming influence that comes from having power under others. Pursue for yourself only the power that comes from sacrificial love. And if you want a PIETY that means more than you may be experiencing now, then understand why Jesus went willingly to the Cross. Christ knew that the only kind of spirituality that matters in the end is humble obedience to the calling of God.

One day the final battle will be over and the record will be reviewed. Will Jesus look at you and me and say with joy: "**Well done my good and faithful servants.**" Or will he turn the corner near that of Judas, and sadly find one more cold and empty niche? Between the hosannas of today, and the coming of that tomorrow, the choice is ours.

Please pray with me...

Lord, none of us here consciously wishes our lives to betray the trust others or you have put in us. Where any of us have loved the false perks, power, or piety vended by this world more than we have loved you and your creatures, we ask your forgiveness today. As we go forth from here, strengthen us by your Spirit to serve, surrender, and obey, knowing that where we do this, eternal blessings, real power, and spiritual life are never far away. This we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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Charles Swindoll, *Come Before Winter*, p.275.