

The Goodness of Friday
Good Friday Message, April 2, 2021
Martha Stringer

His name is forever seared in our memory. It is a name that conjures up profound emotions and reactions we feel deep, in our very souls. A name given to someone who was part of the inner circle, a friend, someone who was smart and financially savvy, an accountant actually. In Hebrew, his name means “praise” or “the praised one”. It’s the name of someone who was trusted. And it is the name of someone turned traitor.

Judas. It is a name that has become synonymous with words like betrayer, backstabber, sinister, snake. Nobody wants to name their son Judas. No, we chose the names that conjure up positive images, Strong biblical names that imply character We name our sons, Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Peter or Paul. We do not name our sons Judas.

We don’t know much about him. But we know he is one of the 12 specially chosen by Jesus to be part of his team. Scholars believe he is the only disciple not from Galilee, Based on his surname Iscariot they surmise he is from the southern part of the country, which would make him something of an outsider – many of the other disciples were brothers, friends, working companions before meeting Christ. We know he’s been with Jesus the better part of three years. He’s received the same training as the other disciples, witnessed the same miracles and received the same gifts to heal the sick and cast out demons. He is trusted enough to be appointed treasurer. And we know this: something was different in him deep down inside. Some kind of confusing disillusionment with Jesus and his kingdom which will lead Judas to follow a path away from Jesus - down a very different path that will ultimately destroy him.

In just a matter of day the mood in the city of Jerusalem turns from triumphant to toxic. The throngs of people who traveled there to celebrate Passover, just days before were shouting Hosanna and laying Cloaks on the road and waving palms in the air as Jesus, on a donkey, rides into the city with his disciples.

But now, just days later, a shroud of darkness begins to descend. One already fled the table where Jesus and his disciples shared the Lord’s Supper. Overcome by evil, Judas is on his way to betray Jesus’ location to the Jewish authorities which will lead to his arrest, his beating and crucifixion.

What bothers us so much about Judas and his betrayal of Jesus? Is it the 30 pieces of silver he received to sell him out – the fact that it’s not a significant amount of money but a pittance? Shouldn’t Jesus’ life be so much more valuable than a mere 30 coins?

Is it the kiss he plants on Jesus’ cheek in the garden of Gethsemane? The irony of an intimate act of homage, affection and respect between friends being used as a tool of betrayal by a traitor?

And are his actions that much worse than the other 11 disciples? Jesus earlier in his ministry when he sensed some were considering falling away, asks, "Will you also go away?" They assured him through Peter, their spokesman, that though others may abandon him, "We will not go away."

They promised they would watch and wait with him in The Garden of Gethsemane. Yet while Jesus was praying pouring out his heart to his Father in such agony that his sweat on his forehead turned to drops of blood, they took naps.

Peter repeatedly pledged he would never deny knowing him yet we know that is exactly what he did - three times. They all broke their promises. Every one of them fled into that night in fright.

I think part of it is our human condition to want a fall guy, someone to accuse, point a finger at and blame.

Since the start of the pandemic crimes targeting Asian Americans have risen dramatically since. In the U.S., there have been close to 4,000 instances of discrimination against Asians in the past year.

Hate crimes against American Muslims soared to their highest levels in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, attacks,

We want a scapegoat to point at and say that Asian person is responsible for the virus! There's that Muslim who flew planes into buildings! There he is - that Judas!— he's the reason Jesus was arrested, tortured and crucified! It's his fault.

To cast blame on Judas is to minimize the Goodness of this day – the goodness of what is otherwise the darkest day in human history. For it was Jesus' plan all along to be arrested, tortured and crucified. He surrendered himself to the authorities. He allowed 6 different corrupt trials where he was unjustly declared guilty. He subjected himself to humiliation and yielded to a spikey crown of woven thorns being pressed down on his head. Jesus picked up the cross intended for us and dragged it through the streets before people who just a few days ago were cheering and now are jeering. He allowed his arms and legs to be stretched out on that cross and nailed in place. And though, because he was fully God, he could end his suffering at any time, he willingly remained on that cross for six hours to experience the most horrific form of execution ever devised. And on that cross, at the peak of his suffering, before he willingly descends into the darkest place imaginable, a place he has never been before, and a place God cannot go, a place where all the sin that has come before and is yet to come will be laid on him, he prays for you. He prays for me. He prays for Judas. He prays for all of us! "Father, forgive them. For they know not what they are doing." Luke 23:33-34

The next time we see Judas he is full of remorse. Matthew writes: "Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He has been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.'"

When the chief priest refused Matthew says: "Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed and went and hanged himself."

How sad. I have heard it said that suicide is a selfish act – a type of cop out. I believe it is an act reflective of a person who is in such darkness and despair, so devoid of all hope they believe there is no other way out of their suffering.

There's something else sad about Judas. I think his greatest failure wasn't his decision to *betray* Jesus; it was his decision to not to *believe* Jesus. He was right beside him for 3 years, worked with him and for him. Heard his teaching, saw his healings and miracles and in spite of all that chose Satan over salvation. It's something that should caution us...you can be going to church, going to growth groups, serving on a mission project, or serving on a ministry team but if you don't let Jesus in to fill that God sized hole in your heart something else will.

What if Judas persevered and pushed through, had he waited, just a matter of days, he would see, there in the flesh, the reason to never give up hope. In just a matter of days he would see the risen Christ, could seek his forgiveness and have an opportunity for redemption. He would know what we all know: yes, we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But "He (God) made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf." Why?

"That we might become the righteousness of God – in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Friends we do not have to wait to receive God's forgiveness. He gave it to us on this night so many years ago when he willingly separated himself from God and descended into darkness for us so we can always be righteous before God. What a powerful reason to never lose hope.

Amen