

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, March 27, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 26:1-16

14 Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests 15 and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. 16 From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

FOUR: AN EASTER STORY #1 THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T BELIEVE

John Adams, the second President of the United States of America, has a fascinating history. In David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize winning biography on Adams, we read about a man whose fierce patriotism and unflappable ideals along with a strong faith in Christ and love for his wife informed his decisions. We also read about some of Adams' greatest trials, including the betrayal of his closest friend.

When Adams was a young bachelor, living in Braintree, Massachusetts and studying law, he surrounded himself with six young men, who became his best friends. Several of these men would serve as advisors throughout his life. His two closest friends were Jonathan Sewall, a fellow Harvard graduate and Richard Cranch, whom McCullough describes as “a good-natured, English-born clockmaker who knew French, loved poetry, and delighted in discussing theological questions with Adams.”¹

Adams, Sewall, Cranch, and three other friends, a pastor, a physician and another lawyer would gather almost every evening in the home of Braintree's most respected citizen, Colonel Josiah Quincy. Quincy was an officer in the militia, Braintree's wealthiest man, and a man of great intellect. He served as a mentor to all of these young men, but what kept the boys coming back to his home was his beautiful daughter Hannah, and her cousin, Esther. Jonathan Sewall fell in love with and eventually married Esther. John Adams and several of the other young men became enamored with Josiah Quincy's daughter Hannah. For almost a year, Adams could think of little else but Hannah. His private journal contained entries that spoke of his love for Hannah. On one spring night, Adams prepared to propose to Hannah, only to have the moment interrupted by Jonathan Sewall and Esther. The moment passed and it wouldn't come back. Instead Hannah fell in love with the physician in the group of friends, and Adams was heartbroken. He had been betrayed by one of his best friends.

A short while later Adams would meet Abigail Smith, of whom he would write in his journal that he was left unimpressed. Those feelings would change, and after a five year courtship Adams and Abigail would wed. The Adams family and the Sewall family remained close. But in 1774, shortly after Adams was chosen by legislature to be one of the five delegates

¹ David McCullough, *John Adams*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 50.

to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Jonathan Sewall, who was serving as attorney general asked Adams if the two of them could have a private conversation. Sewall told Adams that he and Esther were going to move back to Great Britain. He was giving up on America. Adams was so hurt. He wrote, “God forgive him for the part he has acted. . . It is not impossible that he may make the same prayer for me. . . Swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish, [I am] with my country . . . You may depend upon it.”²

Best friends, were Adams and Sewall. And in the end, each felt betrayed by the other. Politics will oftentimes result in such feelings. Some of my friends who hold political office have told me about the sting of betrayal that they have felt from trusted colleagues. But you don’t have to be a politician to know the sting of betrayal.

Husbands and wives who have experienced an unfaithful spouse can teach us all something about what it feels like to be betrayed. Anyone who has lost a best friend due to betrayal can also speak of the pain.

No one in the history of the world is known for his betrayal as much as today’s subject in this first sermon in our Easter Series – Four: An Easter Story. Over the next three weeks, and on Maundy Thursday we will look at four men whose lives were intertwined with Jesus, and who each responded to Easter in a different way. Today’s character is Judas, the famous betrayer.

Let’s read his story from Matthew 26:1-16.

1 When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 2 “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” 3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, 4 and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. 5 “But not during the festival,” they said, “or there may be a riot among the people.”

6 While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, 7 a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. 8 When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. 9 “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.”

10 Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 11 The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. 12 When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. 13 Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

14 Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests 15 and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. 16 From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

(Drama: “The Choice” © Shelly Barsuhn performed by Jason Nygren)

His name has all but disappeared from human nomenclature. None of us would name our son Judas. The other disciples’ names are used. John, for years, was the most popular male name. There are countless men with them name Matthew or Peter or James or Phillip. But, Judas? You don’t find the name Judas today, even though in the day of Jesus, the name was very popular. John MacArthur writes that the name Judas “was simply the Greek form of Judah – the land of God’s people. Some say the name comes from a root meaning ‘Jehovah leads,’ while others think its root has reference to ‘one who is the object of praise.’ Either way, it’s a paradox! If it means ‘Jehovah leads,’ there was never an individual more obviously led by Satan than Judas. If it means ‘one who is the object of praise,’ there was never an individual more unworthy of praise than he was.”³

Leith Anderson writes, “His name has gone down in history as a synonym for the worst. He leveraged his close personal relationship with Jesus to deliver him to the police. Once arrested Jesus was tried, convicted and executed. For us it turned out well—Jesus’ death led to our eternal life and his resurrection from the dead. For Judas it turned out awful—leading to his death by suicide. Judas is the only disciple of Jesus who missed Easter.”⁴

Think about how tragic that was. Judas had followed Jesus for 3 ½ years. He had certainly followed Christ longer than many other disciples. In John 6, Jesus gave the radical requirements for being a disciple of Christ. Many who had followed Jesus up to that point said, “Enough is enough. We can’t follow any further.” In John 6:66 we read, “66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” Judas wasn’t one of those kinds of disciple. He believed Jesus – at least for a time he did. So, what happened? How did he become the man who wouldn’t believe?

Let me give you some background on what Scripture tells us about Judas. Many of us known him as “Judas Iscariot.” Iscariot means “a man from the town of Kerioth.” This was a location about 23 miles south of Jerusalem. This is significant because it means that Judas was the only one of Jesus’ disciples that was not from the region of Galilee.⁵ Probably from the very beginning, Judas felt like a bit of an outsider. He probably also looked down on the other disciples, because people from Judah, looked down on rural Galileans.

³ John MacArthur, *The Master’s Men*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), p. 99.

⁴ Taken from the sermon, *Easter With Unbelief*, preached at Wooddale Church, Eden Prairie, MN on the weekend of March 22-23, 2003 by Leith Anderson, p. 1.

⁵ MacArthur, pp. 99-100.

John MacArthur writes about Judas' character and says, "Outwardly, I don't think Judas appeared to have a defective character. In fact, he must have had qualities and capacities that commended him. He was with the disciples for three years, and when Jesus announced (John 13) that one of them would betray Him, they didn't suspect Judas – they suspected themselves. They had no more reason to suspect Judas than they had reason to suspect themselves. Judas must have been a fantastic hypocrite. So good, in fact, that they elected him treasurer of the group. That just shows you how much they trusted him."⁶

The first time we see Judas speak in the entire Bible is when he complains about the money that was wasted when Mary anoints Jesus' feet with oil in John 12:3-6.

3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5 "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." 6 He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

MacArthur writes, "Judas had the same potential as any of the others. Christ could have transformed him – if his heart had been willing. He had the same raw material and was no more unqualified than the rest. *But the same sun that melts the wax, hardens the clay.* While the other men were being melted and molded, he was being hardened!

He was probably a young, devout, zealous, patriotic Jew who didn't want the Romans to rule, and he saw in Christ an opportunity to follow one he believed was the Messiah. He thought Jesus would set up his earthly kingdom, overthrow Rome, and reestablish the days of prosperity and glory to Israel. Judas followed Jesus for the crass materialistic possibility of getting in on the gravy train. He was never really drawn by the person of Christ, to believe in Him and to love Him: he only saw Him as a means to an end – gain for himself. All he saw was the road to personal prosperity."⁷

Israel was a mess, and most of her citizens longed for the coming of Messiah. The religious leaders had become puppets of the Roman government in the minds of the faithful Jews. The Romans, not the Jews, appointed the Jewish High Priest, who in these days was a man named Caiaphas. This high priest was a political ally to the Romans, and that didn't gain him points with the Jewish people. He was skilled at keeping order in the land, and this kept the Roman government happy. He served five times as long as the average High Priest reigned.

Leith Anderson writes, "During the 104 years from 37 B.C. until AD 67 there were 28 high priests. They averaged less than 3 years 9 months in office. Obviously, when the Romans were displeased with a high priest they just appointed a new one. . . (Caiaphas) must have

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

been very good at keeping Roman governors happy to last so long. How did he do it?

The Romans did not tolerate civil disorder. Mobs and riots could easily get out of hand. In Jerusalem there was no more potentially explosive time than the annual Passover. Jews came from across the empire to celebrate their high holy days. Many of them were political and religious zealots who were looking for a Messiah to lead them against the Roman rulers.

I don't know the population of Jerusalem in the first century but let's assume it was around 50,000—roughly the size of Eden Prairie. At Passover the population enormously expanded for about a week.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells about the Roman governor Cestius who felt that the emperor Nero just didn't understand how difficult and dangerous were the Jews. So, Cestius wrote to Nero describing the Passover festival. He explained that the Jews killed one lamb for every ten people. He ordered the high priest to take a census of the number of lambs slain at one Passover in Jerusalem. The total was 256,500. With ten people per sheep that brought the number of Passover people to 2,565,000. That is roughly the equivalent of the entire population of the Twin Cities coming and staying in Eden Prairie for a week.

It is hard to imagine the logistics of food, lodging and sanitation for so many people in such a small area. But the Roman governor was far more worried about riots and insurrection. It would take the entire Roman army to control the mob.

This helps us to crawl into the thinking of Caiaphas. As high priest he was responsible to make sure that there was peace and quiet during Passover. The problem was Jesus. Everyone was talking about him. He attracted and persuaded large crowds with his speeches. People said he was the Messiah. All the ingredients were in place for an insurrection.

The solution? A preventative strike to take out Jesus before the trouble began. It would have to be done soon, fast and secretly. The risk of a daylight capture was that the crowds might come to his aid.

Matthew 26:14-16

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Judas knew when and where Jesus would be. He could take the police to find him in a quiet private place under the cover of darkness. Once arrested the authorities could quickly dispose of Jesus and head off all the potential problems that were arising. Judas was a double agent.

That's exactly what happened. Judas listened carefully to Jesus' plans. They had all been to the private garden on the Mount of Olives many times before. For the right price Judas led a small army straight to Jesus where he was arrested and taken to trial. Quick trials led to a hasty crucifixion. Crucifixion led to a rapid death. Jesus of Nazareth was no longer a threat. He was disposed of. Peace was preserved. Caiaphas could keep his job."⁸

Leith gives us some good historical background there, but the background doesn't really tell us why Judas did it. Why would one who had witnessed so many of Jesus' miracles, who had seen the dead come back to life, who had seen the mute talk, who had witnessed lepers healed, who had seen thousands fed, who had seen lives transformed turn his back on Christ? Why did Judas turn Christ over to the authorities?

There are many over the years who have speculated that Judas turned Jesus over for the money. After all, we've already seen according to John 12:6 that Judas was not only the treasurer of the group, but a thief who regularly helped himself to the disciple's funds. But 30 silver coins is worth the modern day equivalent of \$20. \$20! Jesus was sold out for \$20! It's unbelievable. The Precious Lamb of God's whereabouts were sold to the Jewish authorities for \$20! That is the exact amount that the prophet Zechariah prophesied that Messiah would be betrayed for in Zechariah 11:12-13. John MacArthur writes, "The sum that Jesus was betrayed for tells me three things: (1) greedy people will settle for any price; (2) the chief priests had such disdain for Judas that they wouldn't give him a larger sum; and (3) they hated Jesus so much that that's all they thought He was worth."⁹

It may be that Judas betrayed Jesus for money, but I'd have to say that is a stretch. \$20 is such a small sum, although any amount of money would have been too small to turn over Christ. A true disciple of Jesus would never do such a thing.

Some have speculated that maybe Judas turned over Jesus for political reasons. Judas believed that Messiah would be a political ruler who would overthrow the Roman oppressors and bring Israel back to her former glory. But, Jesus made it clear that wasn't His plan. Many scholars believe that the straw that broke the camel's back in Judas' faith was Palm Sunday. It is the day after the incident with Mary and the perfume. Judas is still fuming over the fact that so much money was wasted. But, maybe there is hope. Huge crowds have gathered on Jerusalem's streets. The authorities are no doubt worried. Caiaphas is probably scared to death that a riot will ensue and he will lose his post as high priest. Judas has one more glimmer of hope. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the crowds wave palm branches and shout,

"Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!" (John 12:13b)

I can see Judas say to himself, "Finally! The time has come! Now, Jesus will take His throne and establish His kingdom."

⁸ Anderson, pp. 2-3.

⁹ MacArthur, pp. 107-108.

But what does Christ do? Look at John 12:24.

24 Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

Jesus begins talking about His death. All of His talk about a Kingdom that is not of this world would have certainly disillusioned, Judas. Leith Anderson writes, “Judas wouldn’t be the first or the last to abandon a leader because things didn’t go his way. Sometimes the most loyal and faithful followers turn into the most severe critics and outright enemies. It was time for Judas to dump this Jesus who never lived up to his political potential and betrayal was a good way to end the relationship.”¹⁰

Leith gives a third possible reason that Judas betrayed Jesus. Maybe it was a mistake.

“1. Maybe it was all a mistake, just some terrible misunderstanding. Perhaps Judas actually thought he was doing a good thing.

2. To Judas it may have seemed strange that Jesus didn’t see his own political potential. Maybe Judas could do something. He could shove Jesus in the right direction. If Judas could get Jesus into a confrontation with the religious, military and political authorities If they tried to arrest Jesus Jesus would be forced to act. He would declare himself Messiah, rally the people and overthrow the Romans. There couldn’t be a better time than Passover. He just needed a little help from Judas.

3. Could he really have been so foolish? Did Judas really think he was smarter than Jesus Christ? He would not have been the first and certainly not the last to try to push Jesus into political action he did not want.”¹¹

I’m not sure why Judas did what he did. But, I know that he did it, and I know that he had regrets. He watched the trial of Christ. He tried to return the money to the chief priests. He threw the money at their feet. He committed suicide the night that Jesus died. And we know, according to the Scriptures that He had become possessed by the devil on the night that he betrayed Christ.

Judas was the only disciple who didn’t get to witness Easter. What happened on Good Friday was awful and yet God had a plan through it all. Easter changed everything. But, Judas wasn’t around for Easter.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be a Judas. Somewhere along the line, Judas lost his faith. It could be that he never really had it, for when it came to following Jesus, Judas wanted it on his terms and not Christ’s terms.

A true disciple of Jesus Christ follows Him on Christ’s terms and not our terms. We are

¹⁰ Anderson, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

never given the option of being a part-time follower of Jesus Christ. We are never given the option of half-hearted devotion.

I close with these words from Leith.

"I do wonder how someone like Judas can go so far—from one of Jesus' most devoted disciples to Jesus' worst enemy. There is a concept called "tipping point" that was written into a popular business book with the same name. The concept is simple: if you take very small steps in the same direction eventually you will reach a point where everything changes. We have many expressions to describe the idea in our English language: "The straw that broke the camel's back." "The frog in the kettle—raise the temperature slowly enough and the frog will stay in the kettle until he is cooked to death." Maybe that's what happened to Judas. A little unbelief was added every day until a one-time disciple became an all-time traitor.

60 years ago there were two popular North American evangelists preaching about Jesus to large crowds in public arenas: Billy Graham and Charles Templeton. They were good friends. Graham remained faithful to Jesus. Templeton abandoned his Christian beliefs and wrote a book called *Farewell to God: My reasons for Rejecting the Christian faith*. Journalist Lee Strobel went to visit Templeton when he was 83 years old and in failing health. Strobel asked him about Jesus and here's what he said:

'He was the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I've ever encountered in my life or in my readings. He's the most important thing in my life. I know it may sound strange, but I have to say I adore him! Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. He is the most important human being who has ever existed. And if I may put it this way, I miss Him.'

I don't ever want to miss Jesus. Never a Judas. Never a Templeton.

Let's believe in Jesus. Don't even consider dropping out before the race is over. Don't think of quitting before Easter comes."¹²

¹² Anderson, p. 5.