

“Not all of you are clean”

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown
Washington, D.C.

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John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Not all of you are clean.

In the Name of Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The gospel narratives surrounding Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection are chockablock with memorable characters. We have Caiaphas, the implacable high priest and fomenter of insurrection. There’s Peter, so quick to defend Jesus, cutting off the ear of the chief priest’s slave. Barely a day later, with Jesus on the Cross, Peter is on the run, denying that he knows Jesus at all, then regretting it in solitary sorrow. We have Pontius Pilate, of course, balancing justice with statecraft in the face of the mob. And then there’s Jesus himself, marking the stations on the way to his crucifixion on Calvary’s hill.

But the agent-in-chief, in my view, is Judas. Caiaphas and Pilate might be the leading antagonists, but Judas makes it all happen. Judas is the inside man.

In the Gospel of John, of which we have just heard a part, there is a long backstory to tonight’s lesson.

Prior to the action we’ve just heard, Jesus is at dinner in Bethany, at the house of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And at dinner, in a story which many of you may recall, “Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (John 12:3). This was a gesture of thanks on Mary’s

part, of love, of devotion to this man Jesus who had just raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. *I knew you would save him, Lord*, she seems to say, *and I don't know how to thank you*. The perfume, as John points out, was costly. Such an amount of such a valuable substance would have represented for an average family many months' worth of wages.

It is not difficult for us to imagine such an act of gratitude from one who, not days before, had knelt similarly at Jesus' feet, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32). Only a thief could object to an act of such generosity, and it is only a thief who does.

You see, Judas was an operator. The gospels are fairly silent on his motivation for betraying Jesus, but I think that we can imagine any number of likely scenarios. The Evangelist calls him a thief, which he was, and maybe he wanted a little more than whatever he could skim from the common purse. The chief priests paid him thirty pieces of silver, which were worth about a month's wages, no small amount to a poor laborer.¹

Or maybe Judas wanted to make the big time; maybe he was tired of being a *follower*, a staffer. Maybe he wanted to move up in the world, to make something of himself, to get in with a better crowd than the rabble of Jesus' disciples. On Sunday, we heard that Judas went to the chief priests, not the other way around.² "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" he said to them.³

This brings us back to tonight, to the upper room and the Last Supper, Jesus' farewell and his valediction to his disciples. As he prepares to wash their feet, Jesus remarks, cryptically, "Not all of you are clean." Jesus knew who would betray him.

¹ Matthew 26:15

² Mark 14:10

³ Matthew 26:15

I was at a party once, where a group of young adults were demonstrating their fashionable atheism and general ignorance about Christianity. They were maligning American evangelicals, conservative Roman Catholics, and anybody else associated with organized religion. I remember hearing the term, “braindead,” used to describe anyone even vaguely religious.

Did I say anything? Future divinity student that I was, did I speak up? Did I say, “Actually, there’s quite a lot to recommend Jesus.” Did I say, “You know, I go to church, and what you’re describing hasn’t been my experience at all.” I said neither of those things. In fact, I said nothing. It was an act of omission and commission all at once.

I’m sure we have all done this, or some variant. It’s such a simple thing, isn’t it, just to avoid the awkwardness. But, if Jesus were to come into this church right now, would he say, “Not all of you are clean”?

My silence at that party made me complicit with the betrayers, with all those who have given Jesus up to the powers that be, in every generation. I was no exception. As the words of the great Holy Week hymn put it:

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.⁴*

In exchange for *his* betrayal of Jesus, Judas got those thirty pieces of silver. And he got access. He got his fifteen minutes of fame. But it wasn’t worth it. “When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented.” He tried to return the money, and, in the end, he left the city, and he hanged himself.⁵

⁴ “Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended,” Johann Heermann, trans. Robert Bridges, Hymnal 1982, 158.

⁵ Matthew 27:1-5

And yet we know that his remorse was not a revelation. Judas did not know, nor could he, what the other disciples would discover: that the Crucifixion was not the end of the story, that the tomb would be found empty on Easter Day. Judas wasn't listening to Jesus, and he wasn't seeing Jesus, not really; he was too enslaved by his own greed, by his own self-interest. Up until the end, Judas behaved like a man who thought his whole destiny lay within his own control. He was out for himself, by himself.

In a few moments, we will remember Christ's parting act to his disciples. We will make our Holy Communion, the *memorial Christ hath commanded us to make*. When we come to the altar rail (so to speak), will we just be going through the motions? Are we here for a little moral tune-up, or a nice aesthetic experience, and not much else? Will go out of this place, a people just out for ourselves, a people for whom Christian convictions in church are no match for the "cost of doing business" beyond these walls?

Or are we willing to give ourselves to Christ, to be changed by him, no matter the circumstances? Are we willing to do what Judas could not, and to trust in the promises of our Lord, and to obey? Will we hear his command that we love one another, even as he has loved us? And will we give our lives – our whole lives – to him to rise again from the dead?

AMEN.