

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 9, 2017
Palm/Passion Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22:1-11
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 26:36-27:67

This is the only time of the year when we hear the passion narrative read in its entirety, and I am of the opinion that we should let it have its way with us and refrain from lengthy sermonic commentary. There are, however, a few observations I cannot help but share with you.

First has to do with *Simon of Cyrene*. He is the man forced to carry Jesus' cross because Jesus was too weak to do so after being flogged by Pilate's soldiers.

(Flogging was done with whips that contained metal or bone studs in them. It was often done to hasten death in the crucifixion, and many condemned criminals actually died from the flogging itself.)

I've often wondered what it must have been like to be this man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or, perhaps he was right where he needed to be. It's all a matter of perspective, isn't it?

In any event, the passion narrative abounds with irony, and it is highly ironic that a stranger named *Simon* is forced to carry Jesus' cross here, because it emphasizes the abandonment of Jesus by his disciples, especially the disciple named *Simon* (Peter).

The implication seems to be (from the Gospels and from our liturgy, especially the hymns) that Simon Peter represents *all* of us. We all had a stake in denying Jesus and hastening his death.

But Simon Peter isn't the only one to betray Jesus in this episode. There is also Judas. Judas became a compelling figure for me this week, and I have not been able to shake him from my consciousness.

I confess that I have always been very hard on Judas, much harder on Judas than on Peter. I have pretty much agreed with the description in Dante's *Inferno*, where Judas is portrayed as burning in the torment of hell. I have used the fact that Judas sold Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver to gradually color my whole perspective of his character, to think of him as an inherently evil monster with absolutely no redeeming qualities.

But Matthew's passion narrative would not let me get away with that as I read it this week. Yes, we know the first part of the story, where Judas conspires with the religious leaders to betray Jesus for money. A terrible act, to be sure. But an act of which every single one of us is capable of committing.

But notice as the story progresses what happens. In verse 3 of chapter 27, the text says: "When Judas realized that Jesus had been condemned to die, he was filled with remorse."

The implication here is that Judas, when he was initially conspiring to betray Jesus, did not envision and certainly did not intend that it would lead to Jesus' death. It's like the petty thief who never intends that his burglary will lead to murder, or like most of us who never imagine how one disobedient decision can lead us down paths we never could believe.

I don't think that Judas, when he originally bargained for 30 pieces of silver, believed that the end result of that decision would be Jesus' death. And when he learns that this is the case, notice what the text tells us:

When he realized that Jesus had been condemned to die, he was filled with remorse. So he took the thirty pieces of silver back to the leading priests and other leaders. "I have sinned," he declared, "for I have betrayed an innocent man." Then Judas threw the money onto the floor of the temple and went out and hanged himself (27:3-5).

The text gives us a glimpse into both Judas' *heart* and his *actions*. As to his heart, we are told that he was "filled with remorse." The dictionary defines remorse as "deep and painful regret over wrongdoing." His pain and agony are so intense that, after throwing the money onto the temple floor, Judas goes and takes his own life.

I look at this, and I think, this is the very thing I call people to during the Advent season. Think about it. What do we ask of anyone who would leave a life of sin and come to Christ? We ask for *repentance and contrition*. We ask for

repentance, a complete change of mind. And we ask for contrition, a godly sorrow for our sins. If Judas does not meet these requirements, who does?

Kind David did, of course. He confessed and acknowledged, “Against you, you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” And Simon Peter was also filled with remorse, and wept bitterly at his betrayal of Jesus.

But Peter and King David were both restored. So what is the difference between them and Judas? As far as I can tell, simply this: *That Judas lost all hope that he could be forgiven and restored.*

I’m no expert on suicide. But I have to believe that of all the reasons people end their lives, at the top of the list is the fact that they have *lost hope*. They see no way forward.

I am not in a position to know or comment on the state of Judas’s soul. It’s not for me to decide. But I know one thing. I saw Judas in a new light this week. Perhaps for the first time I saw myself *in* him. I empathized with him. And I prayed: *Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy on Judas – and on me.*

The Pulitzer Prize winning poet James Arlington Wright wrote a sonnet about Judas. He writes from the perspective of Judas. The poem reads:

*When I went out to kill myself, I caught
A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.
Running to spare his suffering, I forgot
My name, my number, how my day began,
How soldiers milled around a garden stone
And sang amusing songs; how all that day*

*Their javelins measured crowds; how I alone
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.*

*Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,
I held the man for nothing in my arms. (James Arlington Wright)*

As we come to the Lord's Table today, remember that whether it's Peter, or Judas, or us – we've all betrayed our Lord. We've all sold him out at some point.

But I would encourage you this morning *never to lose hope that you can be forgiven and restored*. Never forget that His nature is always to have mercy. The bread and the wine are tangible promises and signs of that today. So come with faith. Receive his grace and mercy. And then let us go forth together into this most Holy Week.

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