

July 3, 2016

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Antiheroes: Judas

Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25

¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests¹⁵ and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

²⁰ When it was evening, [Jesus] took his place with the twelve;^[c] ²¹ and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²² And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?"²³ He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." ²⁵ Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

Matthew 26:47-56

⁴⁷ While [Jesus] was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." ⁴⁹ At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" ⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶ But all this has taken place, so that the

scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon:

A few weeks ago, I was up early on a Sunday morning, putting the finishing touches on a sermon. Ok, fine, I was writing a significant final portion of the sermon.

But I opened my web browser and pulled up the New York Times. That’s when I learned about the Orlando shooting. Twenty people killed in a nightclub by an undisclosed shooter. Awful.

An hour or two later, I was in my office here at the church, twenty minutes before the service. Now the information had changed. Twenty people killed in an Orlando *gay* club. I took a deep, painful, breath. The tragedy was deepening into something particular, something personal. I was foolish enough to look at some of the pictures. The men fleeing the building looked like men I had seen many times before. My people. I felt hot, immediate tears. Any life lost is a tragedy to be certain. But there is a special kind of pain when tragedy befalls your own peculiar tribe.

By the end of the service the death toll had grown to 49 and I know I wasn’t the only person simply struggling to get my head around it. *What kind of person could do this?* we all asked. Information came out in dribs and drabs about the shooter. His name. His Afghani descent. His father held a press conference, saying that his son was animated by a hatred of gay men. But later it was revealed that he professed his allegiance to ISIS, which complicated his father’s testimony.

I’m sure you are very familiar with the rituals of public outrage that followed. Obama’s remarks. Social media rants. Various criticisms of Obama’s remarks. Speculations about terrorism. Counter-speculations about Islamophobia. Social media rants. Psychoanalysts on cable TV. Accusations of racism and homophobia. A outcry for increased gun control. A surge in new gun purchases. A few brazen preachers who

declared God's satisfaction over the death of gay people. Prayer vigils across the country. Social media rants.

Some of it was an outpouring of grief and anger. But a lot of it was also about where to point the finger. I bathed in these ritual waves of outrage almost obsessively, for several days. I sat in front of the TV, my laptop, my phone. I stared into the shooter's face and tried to look for clues. I felt inside me a great silence.

That night I had dinner with three other gay men. Even though it was self-evident that we had gathered for precisely this reason, we dipped in and out of conversation about the shooting, circling it like wary dogs. It was still too much to discuss. The details didn't add up. The explanations were inadequate. We kept bumping up against the mysteries of evil and suffering.

It was as though the figure and actions of the shooter, no matter the analysis – they didn't add up to the totality of this tragedy. It felt like more than the sum of his parts.

When Andrew and I sat down to dream up a list of antiheroes for this sermon series, the name of Judas kept popping into my head, despite my best efforts to leave him out. None of these people were "easy" to discuss – their ambiguity is what makes it hard to cast them in tidy moral equations.

But maybe none of them are as daunting to me as Judas. In most of the other sermons in this series, the "edgy" aspect of the preaching was taking some of the shine off of some beloved Biblical characters – exploring the shady side of Eve, Samson, or Jacob as a way of highlighting their humanity.

But when it comes to Judas, we have the reverse problem. No one wants to see the words, "Judas" and "hero" in the same sentence. He is universally reviled. It's almost a Christian duty. Exploring the humanity of Judas is like taking a stroll through a minefield. So forgive me if I take careful steps.

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I'll never forget being a sophomore in high school, slumped across my bed reading Dante's 14th century poem, 'The Inferno.' We were asked to read it over Christmas vacation. I often found homework hellish but in this case I found myself literally slogging through the nine circles of Hell. I found Dante's vision of eternal torment alternately beautiful, boring, and a little bit gossipy. But I could feel my curiosity growing as I descended lower and lower. The lustful were confined to the second circle. The wrathful were stuck in the fifth. Murderers made their home in circle seven. *What could be worse?* I wondered, thumbing through the pages.

The pit of hell – the ninth circle – is reserved for the sin of betrayal, at least according to Dante. There, in the very lowest region, sits the devil himself, wedged in a sea of ice. Dante could see the legs of a man protruding from the devil's mouth. "Who hath the worst punishment?" said Dante's guide, Virgil. "Judas. He that hath his head within and plies his feet without." ¹

After having seen that horrifying sight - the worst of the worst – Dante shudders and begins his ascent back to earth.

That was my introduction to a certain kind of cultural sadism around the person of Judas. We like to see Judas suffer. It affirms our sense of justice. Judas is the ultimate villain and he deserves the ultimate punishment. There is a long and grotesque tradition of portraying him as both physically and morally deformed even before his betrayal. ² Even the name Judas can serve as shorthand for a person who unforgivably betrays another.

Given who Judas was and what Judas did, that shorthand is understandable. He performs an essential role in our shared story of the battle of good and evil. But it seems important to me to recognize

¹ Dante Alighieri, "The Divine Comedy," Canto XXXIV.

² "Sealed With A Kiss," by Adam Kirsch. www.nytimes.com. April 3, 2009.

that Judas also performs another important function: letting the rest of us off the hook.

It seems like the Orlando finger-pointers divide into three primary camps.

First, there are those who blame radical Islam.

Second, there are those who blame inadequate gun control.

Third, there are those who blame the incident on homophobia.

It's not too hard to find people who have fixated on one of these ideas as the core problem and the core solution. To me, it seems useless to focus on any one of these explanations to the exclusion of others. To me, it seems self-evident that it is all of these things and none of these things. We bump up against the edges of what we understand.

But there is another dimension to this story – not completely understood or verified – that complicates the narrative. Many of the people who were at Pulse that night recognized the gunman. They recognized him as someone who had been there before. Not just one or twice, to scope the area, but maybe twelve times in the past year.

Other men describe meeting him on online dating apps. At least one man claims to have had a relationship with the shooter. This man believes that the gunman's actions were rooted in his deeply conflicted feelings about his sexuality and in his sense of rejection both the Muslim and gay community.³

To me, it was a shock to learn this information, as it challenged my understanding of the "enemy." He committed an unthinkable act of violence against the LGBTQ community. And he was also, somehow, one of us.

³ "Orlando shooter's alleged lover: it was revenge, not terrorism." By Louis Nelson, June 22, 2016. <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/orlando-shooter-gay-lover-omar-mateen-224644>

It should not come as a surprise to us that the Gospels offer varying depictions of why and how Judas did what he did.

Both Mark and Matthew's version of the story, for example, depicts a Judas infuriated by Jesus' willingness to be anointed with an entire jar of perfume. "Why the waste?" he fumes. "This ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor (26:9). The very next paragraph finds him storming to the chief priests, looking for a way to bring Jesus to ruin. This sequence is included by John as well, but John includes an aside to the reader that Judas' motives were corrupt: "He said this not because he cared about the poor," John asserts, "but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it" (12:6).

Regardless of the differences, Matthew, Mark, and John paint the picture of a man pushed to evil by a toxic combination of self-righteousness and greed. Such a man fits well with the labels we often assign him.

But Luke's account of Judas' motivations is quite different. There is no mention of the money. The chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, and then "Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve. He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple about how he might betray [Jesus] to them" (22:3-4). In Luke's telling of it, Judas is some kind of pawn in a cosmological drama.

You'll find that tension between Judas the evil traitor and Judas the cosmic instrument throughout the Scriptures. It's laid out explicitly by Jesus himself in our text for today. He's seated with his disciples, his best friends, when he declares that one of them will betray him.

"The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me," he said at the Passover meal. The hand in the bowl is less a secret sign and more a symbol of the intimacy between Jesus and his betrayer. The audacity of a traitor at the table sends the disciples into a whirlwind of self-defense. "Not me! Surely not me! Not me."

Then Jesus shifts in tone from wounded friend to stoic prophet: “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for him if he had not been born” (26:24).

That’s when Judas, friend, pawn, traitor, repeats the refrain of the others: “Surely not I, Rabbi?” Jesus replied, “You have said so.” Whether or not you read Judas’ protest as sincere or not in this moment says a lot about how you view his fate.

The Bible is similarly divided on the cause of Judas’ death. If the Book of Acts is to be believed, Judas used the money he earned betraying Jesus to buy a field, where he ultimately fell headlong to his death. The field became known as the Field of Blood (1:18-19). If we take Matthew as our authority, however, Judas is quickly horrified by his own actions. Matthew says that he repented of his betrayal and tried, unsuccessfully, to return the money to the chief priests. When he realized that there was no way to atone for his sins, he hung himself in a field, also known as the Field of Blood (27:8).

The Gospels are in agreement that Judas committed a terrible act of betrayal that set into motion Jesus’ arrest and execution. But, as they say, the devil is in the details, and in this case the details paint several different pictures of the devil. In some pictures, Judas is a man set on destruction, laying his trap and then following it to his devastating conclusion. In other pictures, he is caught in a web of preordained actions that Jesus greets with acceptance and without surprise. Judas is increasingly panicked and regretful, trying to repent, trying to begin again. Like Peter, he has betrayed his teacher and friend. Unlike Peter, he gets no second chances to sort it out.

I could point you to books and essays trying to make sense of all this. But I prefer to simply say that it’s a reminder that the story of Jesus’ death is bigger than the sum of its parts too. Even particularly notorious parts, like Judas.

The preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber likes to say while there may be significant differences between Judas and us, there is one thing that is true for us all.

“Judas carried with him into that field the burden of not experiencing God’s grace because he was removed from the community in which he could hear it,” she writes.

In Judas’s ears there never was placed a word of grace. And let me tell you, that’s not something the sinner can create for him or herself. It is next to impossible in isolation to manufacture the beautiful, radical grace that flows from the heart of God to God’s broken and blessed humanity. As human beings, there are many things we can create for ourselves: entertainment, stories, pain, toothpaste, maybe even positive self-talk. But it is difficult to create this thing that frees us from the bondage of self.

We cannot create for ourselves God’s word of grace.⁴

It’s not for us to know whether Judas walked a doomed, inevitable path. But when we hold him so far away from us, so *Other*, so *Evil*, such a *Monster*, we learn nothing about the brokenness that runs deep within every single one of us. It is our Christian responsibility to enter into those broken places – his, ours. It is our deep and collective responsibility to share the love of God, the enduring grace of God, with everyone who will hear it. It’s our responsibility – so important – to create safe spaces where stories can be shared, sins confessed, forgiveness extended, healing begun. That’s what church is supposed to be. Let’s keep talking about extremism. Let’s keep working on gun control. Let’s keep fighting homophobia. Let’s support people with mental illnesses. All of those things are part of the solution. But what should *we* do? What should the *church* do?

Let’s make sure no man or woman ever wanders alone into that Field of Blood, so lonely and afraid and ashamed that they do something they

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Offering God’s Word of Grace.” Plough Quarterly Magazine No. 7: Mercy. <http://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/forgiveness/offering-gods-word-of-grace>

might regret forever. Let's be the church in the Field of Blood, pointing to the truth of God's always expanding, always redeeming love.

Because you know what? He didn't know.

The day after the shooting, Perry and I attended a vigil at the YNOT Lot – that vacant lot at the corner of North Avenue and Charles Street. A number of you were there, which was a beautiful thing to see. In fact, an amazing cross-section of Baltimore was present, nearly a thousand people. It was a “Bring Your Own Candle” event, and it was moving to see people arrive with boxes and book bags and handfuls of candles. One teenage kid was holding a large, awkward glass votive. It looked like he had snatched it off of his dining room table. In fact, I turned down so many candles it was funny. People just seemed to want to share the light.

So many people shared moving words of hope and persistence from the stage. But I was particularly touched by a young transgender woman named Bryanna Jenkins. She came onto the stage, weeping. “I can't do this no more,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes. “I can't do it no more. I'm tired.” She explained that every day when she leaves her home she fears death. “They're saying that [the shooter] did this because of radical Islam,” she said, her voice shaking. “But we know that he is a child of America.”

When she said that, there was a wave of approval from the crowd and I felt the kind of goose-bumps that I associate with the truth. ⁵

I know that she meant that he was nurtured in the same homophobic environment in which she struggles to survive. But I'd also like to think that she was saying that he is in some sense ours. He came from us, he belongs to us. He is our enemy, and he is our brother. What he did and why he did it is not for us to explain. We cannot. What we can do, though, is make a choice to look that brokenness in the eyes. To make a

⁵ “Hundreds Gather In Station North To Mourn Orlando Victims,” www.citypaper.com, June 21, 2016.

choice to see in that face a beloved child: broken, confused, and afraid. To recognize that the child is in some essential way you and in some essential way me. Loved by God more than we can imagine. Forgiven, even today.

I love America, by the way. Traveling to the Middle East and Central America in the last couple of months has reaffirmed the ways I love this country and its people. I'm grateful for the people who formed it. But I have also been reminded that it is so dangerous to project our brokenness onto enemies who conveniently look nothing like us. That's an American tradition, too. "Surely not I, Lord! Not me. Surely not me."

Jesus is inviting us into a different way of life. It is a harder way, but it also contains a word of grace and love that each one of us desperately needs to remember.

Back at the vigil, the darkness gathered around us. The sun had disappeared long ago behind a row of buildings.

"Look around you Baltimore," said another speaker on the platform. "Look at these people. This is the reason why hate will not win." I did pan the crowd. The strangest group of people you ever did see. So many people gathered in that Field of Love. But we held our candles in the air and bravely looked each other in the eyes. It was the kind of awkward eye contact that I will often go to great lengths to avoid. But our faces were so beautiful that night – radiant even – in the aura of all that light.