

Sermon

There were two deaths this week. Though only one receives central billing; performed on center stage. Only one gets our attention with prayers and hymns. The other, central to the story, is swept under the rug.

The week began with Sunday and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Palms and praises. Shouts of Hosanna and a feeling of celebration.

On Monday, Jesus and his disciples entered the Temple to find a marketplace. Anger took hold and they overturned tables and pop-up shops, driving the crowd out of the temple. On Tuesday, Jesus preached. He used parables, analogies, to convince the people of Jerusalem of his God movement, of new ways of being faithful, and his authority. By Wednesday, the temple and roman authorities had heard enough. He had kicked up enough dust, he had unsettled enough minds, he had challenged the status quo and threatened their power.

So the authorities in the government and the authorities in the temple began to plot. And they realized that the quickest way to end this potential uprising, to quash this movement would be to end its head, to remove its leader. And to do so, they needed someone from the inside, someone in that inner sanctum of disciples who could tell them every move Jesus and his comrades would make. They needed a mole, a spy. And they found Judas.

The ancient church called the Wednesday of this Holy Week, Spy Wednesday. A day named for the disciple Judas, on which we hear of his betrayal, the silver coins, the intrigue. The day named for the moment Judas spied for the authorities and ultimately handed Jesus over to death. Saint Judas. That is not a phrase that falls comfortably off the tongue. Judas is not like the other disciples; we do not name churches after Judas, I know no superstitious grandmothers who place statues of him in their gardens or wear medals around their necks. How many people do you know who name their children Judas? Poor Judas. We all know what it's like when something doesn't turn out the way we wanted it to. When our expectations become let downs. When our vision for something exciting is returned to us in reality as disappointing, or not quite. We've all had our fair share of that this year.

Judas had been by Jesus' side since the very beginning. Judas sat at Jesus' feet listening to his turn-the-world-upside-down- message; taking in new understandings of God, of religious authority, of the social ordering of the world. He was converted, ready to take up arms with Jesus and his movement. Ready to see the world start anew, the occupying government dismantled, the temple reformed. He had been a faithful disciple. And when Jesus and the disciples entered Jerusalem on Sunday, on a donkey, not a horse, with palm branches, not swords, I think Judas began to really understand what Jesus came to do. Not to conquer, but teach. Not to reign with weapons and armies, but with peace and humility. It wasn't the mighty revolution that Judas expected, and he was

disappointed, disheartened, disillusioned. And those officials came at the right time because Judas felt let down, he felt angry, he was vulnerable. So Judas did the unthinkable and turned Jesus over to them for thirty silver coins. And the Gospel tells us that the guilt and the shame and the heartache for his actions, was too much to bear. And Judas takes his own life.

For centuries the Christian tradition has said that Judas got exactly what he deserved. The church has so often used Judas as the example of ultimate betrayal, of the greatest sinner. In some parts of this world, Spy Wednesday is still observed; marked with customs to remind us of the brokenness of that day. Some communities in Europe replace the metal clapper of their church bells with pieces of wood, to create a duller, haunting sound. In other parts of the world, the day is known as ‘Ugly Wednesday’—the day chimneys are swept, covering hands and faces with black soot, as a reminder of guilt of Judas. Then there are church customs much more bitter. For centuries, young people threw an effigy of Judas from the top of a church steeple, dragging it through the village amidst hurling sticks and stones, and whatever remained of the effigy was drowned in a nearby stream or pond.

During Holy Week, year after year, Judas is put on trial in our minds. Stripped of dignity and grace. Judas is treated as one less than, horrible and unworthy, undeserving of absolution. He has over the centuries become the enemy, the antagonist, the villain in the passion drama, and that is unfair. In a moment of desperation and confusion; hopes dashed and meaning lost, Judas--a very human being--failed.

Now Christian theologians from Thomas Aquinas to Billy Graham have long claimed that Judas is beyond forgiveness; that due to his actions he is unable to receive pardon from God. And I think they are wrong.

If we believe in a God that loves all and forgets none; if we indeed worship a God from whom—as our scripture reads—nothing can ever separate us, a God who never turns a back to us, but offers unlimited forgiveness and unrelenting love...and, we do...then Judas, Judas receives that same pardon and mercy. And that isn't really comfortable. It doesn't feel like justice. But it is the wideness of God's mercy, God's tenderness, the abundance of God's welcome. The grace, the love, the forgiveness that is offered to you and offered to me, is offered to Judas in the same, with no fine print, no exclusions, no exceptions.

Nobody said this to Judas. On that night of Betrayal, when Judas ran off, he left alone. No other disciple followed him, chased after him. His community never sought him out, never offered him the same assurance that God offered them. Even when he knew he messed up, when he attempted to repent by throwing the silver coins back at the authorities, no one came to Judas.

Maybe extending that love and forgiveness was simply too painful for them. Maybe it was easier for Judas to be identified as the problem, the traitor, the one who failed so they

didn't have to sit in the awkward and discomfoting reality that we all fail. We all miss the mark. We are human.

Judas' story is uncomfortable--not because he is the culprit, but because he is a mirror. A mirror image of humanity: a life filled with hopes dashed, despair and mistakes; a life filled with end of the ropes moments and an often willingness to betray our values when life doesn't go our way.

And still, despite it all: God extends boundless love and welcome to us all; nothing, no human failing, no mistake, no scar, nothing can separate us from God's love.

That's what is revealed in this Holy week. That's what Jesus paraded into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday to teach: the mighty power of the transforming love of God—a God that turns our human expectations and limitations on its head—and offers us a glimpse and an invitation into the pulsing heart of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.