

The Temptation We All Must Face

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John 12:1-6; Psalm 41

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This morning I am beginning my Lenten Series under the title, Transformed by the Cross. Six sermons that will follow the Lenten devotional put together and available for free either in the foyer, on line: <http://assets.denisonforum.org/pdf/devotionals/lent-devotional-2015.pdf>, or off our Website, written and made available by James Denison. I liked the idea that I received from one of our elders that a Lenten Devotional for the entire congregation might be a good tool to help us all walk along the Lenten path together, and so I have picked up on Denison's devotional that highlights 6 different character studies from those who were part of the story when Christ was crucified, died, buried, and then miraculously resurrected on Easter morning.

This morning, Denison's devotion begins to my way of thinking with a strange character. This morning we will take a quick look at Jesus disciple, Judas, and we get about as much information as perhaps is possible to know about one of the 12 disciples, the one called Judas Iscariot. Judas was beyond question, the most popular name for any young Jewish boy to be named in Jesus day. Judas is Greek for "Judah" and it means "Yahweh leads" and you may remember that Judah was one of the names of the 12 sons of Jacob and eventually became the largest tribe in Israel. A couple of Jesus disciples, when we check the records had the name Judas, among other names. Jesus had a half-brother named Judas as well. Judas was Greek remember for the Hebrew name Judah.

I know a young man who lives here in town by the name of Judah, but I have never known of anyone with the name of Judas and I would be surprised if any of us do either. I have a book in my library written by a Don Richardson entitled: Peace Child and it's the story of his missionary labors among a tribe in Papua New Guinea.

When Richardson had finally learned their language, there came a day when he had opportunity to tell them the Gospel. He started with Christ's miraculous birth, His life and ministry, and then proceeded to the end of Jesus' time on earth. He set the stage talking about how Jesus made His final journey to Jerusalem, the incredible reception of the people on Palm Sunday, then the treachery of Judas who worked behind the scenes to betray Jesus to death. To his amazement, when he finished telling them about the traitor, the people showed complete delight in Judas. Richardson was appalled at their reaction.

He discovered that the highest virtue in their culture was deceit—and Judas was the greatest example of deceit about which they had heard. Here was a man who successfully betrayed to the death a great and good man, thus Judas became their instant hero. It was obvious to Richardson that he had his work cut out for him to evangelize this tribe. You need to read the book to discover the beginning and end of this incredible and true missionary story.

The name Judas, down through the history of the church has become a fairly despised name to be sure. The name of Judas Iscariot is listed 22 times in the New Testament. He is distinguished from the other's (there are 8 Judas' in the New Testament that go by the same name) by the last name "Iscariot." As James Denison points out in his devotional, we really don't know exactly what "Iskariotes" means. Three options have been proposed by those who are experts in the language. It could mean that Judas had been born in a town called Kerioth, and

if this is true he was the only non-Galilean among the 12. It could also mean that Judas had red hair or a ruddy complexion or finally, it could mean that he possibly carried a hidden dagger (sicarii) and therefore was probably part of a group known as the Zealots. The Zealots were Jewish patriots who wanted to overthrow the Roman government by forcible means.

In choosing to preach a sermon during Lent on Judas, I suppose we might want to try to give him a break as he is not pictured very favorably in any light in the New Testament. For example, I got to thinking – didn't Judas repent? What do you think about that? Didn't he return the money and clearly say he had betrayed innocent blood? How much different from any of us at perhaps our worst moments, might Judas have been?

It's from the Gospel of John that we get the most information about Judas Iscariot. We can clearly tell from the fourth gospel (when we compare it to the other three) that the apostle John doesn't seem to like Judas too much at all. In the other three gospels we get information but we don't really get any of the gory details like John provides.

Now from this morning's text we are told that Judas had some pretty glaring character flaws. In verse 6 of chapter 12 in John's gospel we are told that Judas was a thief and that he used to steal from the purse or money box. This morning, I have placed a small box of silver coins onto the communion table to represent the greed and avarice that seems to have characterized this disciple and I am choosing throughout this whole season of Lent to consider my own greed and unwillingness to give more, to share more with others. Also I am choosing to ask myself continually about my own motivations to serve and to be a pastor. It is a wise question we can ask ourselves when contemplating the life of Judas.

Commentators over the centuries have asked the question "Why?" What could have possibly motivated Judas to become a traitor? Love of money; jealousy of the other disciples; fear of the inevitable outcome of the Master's ministry which made him turn state's evidence in order to save his own skin? The idea I have always thought best might have been something like an enthusiastic intention to force Christ's hand and make him declare himself as the Messiah, especially if Judas was a Zealot! It's also possible that Judas eventually became a bitter, revengeful spirit which arose when his worldly hopes were crushed and this disappointment turned to spite and spite became hate. All these motives have been suggested.

In the final analysis we find ourselves, at least I do, realizing that at some point in time, we each could be just like Judas. I realize, when I am being completely honest with myself, that I too have not only been betrayed, but have been a betrayer as well. Whatever the motive that Judas might have had for betraying Jesus and I suppose the ultimate answer doesn't really matter, as we all still can learn from his failure.

James Denison concludes that Judas probably was acting more out of pride than any other motive when he betrayed Jesus. Ultimately pride, as I understand it, seeks to do whatever it takes to benefit the self rather than another. Pride would be the opposite of humility. Dr. Denison, in our Lenten devotional, points to the circumstance in the scriptures that seems to have triggered Judas' decision to betray Jesus. In considering the ultimate reason for betrayal, it is a reasonable possibility that Judas had had his pride severely wounded after the stern rebuke he receives at Jesus' anointing from Mary. It comes in John and chapter 12 and the next few verses where the story is told.

If Denison is correct about pride being the motive that caused Judas to betray Jesus, then which one of us might possibly be able to throw the first stone of condemnation against him? After all, the sin of pride goes all the way back to the very beginning, to the Fall (Genesis 3:5), and was the sin that was present in Eve's heart. Pride can be seen in so many different ways that during the season of Lent it's a good sin to acknowledge in each of our hearts and to ask God to cleanse from us personally. Pride, they say, always goes before a fall, and I can tell you from experience, in just a couple of times in my life, going all the way back to highschool, that it has been true of me.

If Denison is right in assessing pride as the sin that motivated Judas, then we do well to understand that it is pride that represents the sin that can easily tempt us all as well. For example, it is possible to be very active in church, walking always through the doors, day in and day out as though we are walking with Jesus, never having turned our hearts with submission. This is the "All In" idea that I have been suggesting as we've been preparing for our Lenten journey considering the vows made at our baptisms. Any believer in Jesus can trust in Jesus for eternal life but somewhere along the way be turned to serve the self rather than Jesus. If it could happen with one who walked face to face for 3 years with the Savior, it could happen to me.

May God guard and protect each of us this Lenten season and guide us into a clearer understanding of the temptation that all must face - the deadly temptation of pride! May it be so... Amen.