

## THE KISS AND THE CROSS

*47 While he 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. (Matthew 26:47-50, NRSV)*

This past week Matthew, my 7-year-old, literally felt Godforsaken. Sick and lying on the couch, Matthew occasionally moaned in agony. I tried unsuccessfully to comfort him. In-between the groans of discomfort he said, "Dad, I thought you said there was a God." Nodding my head yes I answered, "That's right I believe there's a God." "And I thought you said God could heal people" Matthew continued. "That's right," I said, "God can help people." Then Matthew hit his poor old minister dad right between the eyes with the inevitable zinger, "Then why am I so sick and why isn't God helping me?" My bumbling answer was inadequate and fell flat on his 7-year-old ears. "Well Matt, God gave us brains and scientists have invented lots of great medicine and maybe if we went to the doctor we could get some." At which point Matthew loudly protested, "I'M NOT GOING TO THE DOCTOR. HE'LL JUST GIVE ME A SHOT." I admit I sensed relief that we were now arguing about the doctor rather than about the existence of God. The existence of the doctor was all too real to my 7-year-old.

Today's scripture lesson talks about the most famous and pivotal betrayal in history—the betrayal of Jesus by

Judas. For 2,000 years people have asked the obvious question, why did Judas do it? Through the centuries a number of different theories have emerged. The traditional answer centers on greed. Judas did it for the money, 30 pieces of silver. Known as an *argurion*, 30 pieces of silver represented the fine required from someone who accidentally killed a servant ([www.csmonitor.com/2003/1125/p1...](http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1125/p1...)). What a striking irony that the baby born in a Bethlehem barn who received the expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh should be betrayed for a pittance (between \$10 and \$20 by today's standards). On the other hand, it seems appropriate that the amount traditionally paid for the accidental killing of a servant was paid for the betrayal and eventual death of Jesus. Jesus, who spent his life serving God, Jesus who spent his life serving people in need, Jesus who just a few hours before kneeled like a servant and washed the disciples feet, was sold out by Judas for the servant rate. To add insult to injury, Judas kissed Jesus as a sign to the soldiers. And so they arrested Jesus.

Again we ask why did Judas do it? Some have argued that Judas did it because it was God's will that Jesus die and somebody had to do it. In other words, Judas did all of us a favor. They argue that if Judas hadn't betrayed Jesus we might not have had Good Friday's cross or Easter Sunday's resurrection. This theory neglects the fact that Jesus and the religious and political authorities were on a collision course. Eventually, even without Judas, they would have caught up with Jesus and killed him.

A more modern theory posits that Judas suffered disillusionment with the whole Jesus movement. He really believed that Jesus was going to overthrow the Romans and free the Jewish people. The crowds that gathered for Jesus' triumphant Palm Sunday entrance should have been the spark to start the revolution. As the week wore on it became

clear that Jesus only intended a spiritual kingdom, not a literal earthly one. Disillusioned, Judas cashed in on Jesus.

A final theory, closely related to the disillusionment theory, argues that Judas believed that Jesus planned to establish an earthly kingdom. However, things were moving much too slowly for Judas. He thought that by bringing the authorities to arrest Jesus, he could jumpstart the kingdom's establishment on earth. Wouldn't Jesus bring down legions of angels to fight off the soldiers and start the war for liberation? Not a chance.

So why did Judas betray Jesus? We'll never know. Was Judas full of greed or full of faith? Did he think he could invest the money and get rich or that he would be a hero for starting a holy war? We don't know, but it's safe to say that the outcome did not sit well with Judas. Later that night Judas repented and returned the money. However, the authorities had no intention of freeing Jesus. In deep remorse, Judas committed suicide, by hanging himself.

Did Judas commit an unforgivable sin by committing suicide? Traditionally, a large sector of Christianity believed that Judas committed a mortal sin by killing himself, fell from a state of grace, and thus went to hell after he died. Even the makers of the recent movie, *Constantine* (the movie has nothing to do with the ancient Roman emperor) contained characters who went to hell for committing suicide.

As you might guess, I completely disagree with this view. First of all, I don't believe in the concept of mortal and venial sins. These theological constructs are simply not found in the Bible. Second, Jesus taught and practiced forgiveness, grace, and love. Why would this not extend to people who, feeling at the end of their rope, commit suicide? Besides, I do not believe that most people who commit

suicide do so with all of their wits about them. Usually these people are suffering from depression or other maladies and suicide seems like the only way out. I believe that God embraces these desperate, suffering souls upon their entrance into the afterlife. For an excellent discussion of this topic read the piece Chase recently wrote in our church blog ([www.uccmanhasset.org](http://www.uccmanhasset.org)).

If Judas' suicide didn't condemn him to hell, did his betrayal of Jesus? Dying on the cross, Jesus spoke of the soldiers who nailed him there and prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." I imagine that Judas was as clueless as the soldiers. His desperate attempt to free Jesus by returning the money demonstrates Judas' deep regret.

Irish poet and literature professor at Dublin's Trinity College, Brendan Kennelly, wrote a 400-page book of poetry about Judas. Entitled *The Book of Judas*, Kennelly's book was a bestseller in Ireland. As a teacher Kennelly challenges his students to see history's reviled figures as individuals, not just symbols. By viewing people like Judas in a new way, Kennelly believes that we gain new insights into the evil that lurks in our own lives.

According to one reviewer, Kennelly presents his Judas, "...as a Dubliner who namedrops modern pubs as often as he namedrops Mary Magdalene or Barrabas. He is a known evil writing letters to the atom bomb and drinking wine with Hitler, but the very fact that his evil is so well known makes it less frightful. His tone is so conversational, the barriers drop; one cannot imagine dining at a restaurant with Charlie Manson, but it seems a little easier to do so with Judas. Then he uncovers the evil at the core of things. The pop psychology anthem 'Be your true, authentic self'-- he says he gave that advice to Hitler, and see where it got us" ([www.atu2.com/news/connections/kennelly/](http://www.atu2.com/news/connections/kennelly/)).

Kennelly's epic poem inspired his fellow Irishmen, the rock band U2, to write a song about Judas and Jesus called, "Until the End of the World" (originally on the *Achtung Baby* compact disc). U2's take on Judas is quite refreshing. In the last verse Judas and Jesus meet in the afterlife in the lyrics, "Waves of regret and waves of joy. I reached out for the one I tried to destroy. You, you said you'd wait till the end of the world." Imagine it. Jesus and Judas meeting. We'd expect "waves of regret." It was this regret that led Judas to commit suicide. I would never have imagined there might also be "waves of joy." And yet in seeing Jesus again Judas would know for a fact that he hadn't destroyed Christ for good.

Bear in mind that all of this is mere speculation, but it is interesting food for thought. Would Jesus wait for Judas to beg for forgiveness or would Jesus take the initiative like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son? Would Jesus condemn Judas on the spot or would he offer forgiveness, grace, and love? And would Jesus insist on waiting until the end of the world? Your guess is as good as mine.

Each and every one of us has betrayed others and each of us knows the pain of being betrayed. It hurts and there is no easy road to reconciliation. Yet even after the most painful betrayal there is still hope for all of us, maybe even Judas. AMEN.

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## PASTORAL PRAYER

Most merciful God, when we have been estranged from you, when we have wronged our neighbors, when we have not taken good care of ourselves, we ask your forgiveness and pray for strength. Challenge us to take a fresh look at ourselves that we might see our strengths as well as our weaknesses. When we falter and lose courage, hold us up and nudge us onward.

Thank you, O God, that Jesus call us from death into life, from the shadows into a new day of your refreshing grace and peace. Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.

Parts of this prayer were adapted from *Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life, Lent/Easter 2005*, p. 53.