

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

“Judas Priest”--The Relationship between Jesus and Judas Rev. Charles Schuster March 7 , 2010

I want to thank the bell choir, the music they provided today is just spectacular. You know, that last piece they played, kind of reminds me of a hybrid car. You can't always tell when the engine's stopped. That piece deserved two responses from us anyway. Thank you.

It makes me a little uneasy being critical of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. After all, I am one of his followers, and I encourage other people to join me in pursuit, and I think he lived a life that we can emulate, and I believe he spoke the truth that we all need to hear. But I have, in some quiet moments of contemplation, pondered a few things about what he did and said. For example, it always puzzled me, why he was so harsh with his mother, Mary, when she told him to turn the water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Looked like, to me, a reasonable request, and why would he have said to her, "What has this to do with you?" or "Mind your own business." We have children in church today, and what would happen to any of them if they said that to their mothers? I'm reminded of the mother of three children who were notoriously out of control. One person asked her, "If you had it do over again would you have children?" And she said, "Yes, definitely, but not the same ones."

Mary may have felt that way. Jesus was not always nice to his mother, and that scripture of the wedding at Cana is not a good one for Mothers Day, and the reason I know that is, I did it once, here. Got lots of letters. Then there was that incident when Jesus said, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." What's with that? I mean, surely he was misquoted. And what's this business about "Let the dead bury the dead"? Now, we have a grief support group that meets here on Tuesday afternoon. Can you imagine saying that to those people, "Let the dead bury the dead."? So, there are these things he did and said that I really don't understand, but there is no need to be critical of him for that, because it's possible we don't have the whole story or the right words, or maybe the complete facts. But there is one thing I will not get, I don't. I have thought about this for years, I just don't understand why someone as wise and wonderful, why someone as tuned-in and turned up to God, why someone who was so

super-special and super-spiritual, why Jesus, who knew people's minds before they put words to their thoughts, why, given how smart he was and how holy he was and hallowed he was, why he would have chosen that bunch of losers for disciples. I mean, most of the time when he told his stories and tried to make a point, the common, ordinary people got the point right away, and how often did he have to explain it to the disciples later? How often that they didn't get it, even after he explained it twice. And besides that we remember how, when he needed them, a few of them, to stay up with him the night before his arrest, how they fell asleep. And then there was this pathetic excuse about how the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. And then when he really needed a stand-up supporter, the one he called the Rock, upon whom the church would be built, Peter denied he even knew him, not once, not twice, but three times. And the others ran for their lives. They were cowards, they were spineless. And he selected them. And you could make a case that finally they got it together, for they became heroic apostles. And it is true, had they not done that, there would be no church. So maybe he's vindicated.

But still, there is one choice he made that leaves me with more questions than I can answer, more problems than I can solve. Why Judas? Why would he have chosen Judas as one of the disciples? You don't have to be psychic to know that Judas was not a good choice. First of all, because he didn't fit in. He was a contrarian. Reminds me of the words of Lily Tomlin, who said, "Human beings invented language because of our deep-seated need to complain." That's Judas for sure. Also reminds me of a church in Oklahoma, Will Rogers United Methodist Church. You know Will Rogers, famous for saying, "I never met a man I didn't like." Will Rogers United Methodist Church, their church motto is, "We are the people Will Rogers Never Met." Judas would have joined that church. He didn't fit in. He was different. He was difficult. When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God and little children, and how they should be allowed to come to him because for such as they belongs to the kingdom of God, Judas was complaining about how children are disruptive and should be seen and not heard, and maybe not even seen. And it was Judas who complained on the Mount before the Sermon, that they couldn't possibly feed all those people with five fish and two loaves of bread, and it was Judas who was urging Jesus to stand up to be come a force, to become a revolutionary. "Be a man, Jesus." Judas just didn't fit in. I mean, anybody could see that.

Ever been in a group where there was someone, you wondered how they got in, because they didn't quite mix with the others? Maybe they didn't look just right when the group picture was taken? They were always looking off in a different direction? Or when a vote was taken, these were the ones who voted different from anybody else. Why did he do it? Why did he choose Judas? What in the world was he thinking? What was it about Judas? Jesus must have known. Someone who wouldn't fit in. Someone who would stand against the others. Someone who was always pointing out the other side, someone who couldn't go along with the flow, but always stood against the stream. Someone who was always marching to the beat of a different drummer, hearing the sound of a different song. Did you ever find yourself on the fringe of things, on the outside looking in, saying the wrong thing, getting funny looks, feeling outside, outcast, wondering why, trying to be part? Did you ever feel like that contrarian, difficult, weird, strange, stranger. Wonder why Jesus chose Judas? He didn't fit in. Sometimes, neither do we.

Another thing about Judas, he didn't do right. Not only was he a contrarian, he was a criminal. He was a crook. He was dishonest, and it wasn't little things, either. It wasn't like the old fisherman who said "That bass I caught must have weighed thirty pounds, it took me three hours to bring that fish into my boat" and a friend said to him, "You know, I saw a picture of that fish. You'd be lucky if that fish weighed ten pounds." And the old boy looked at his friend and said, "Well, you know, a fish fighting for three hours, it would take a lot of weight out of him." Judas wasn't that kind of dishonest. Not like the man who wrote the letter to the IRS, "Dear Sirs, I underpaid my tax bill last year, and I can't sleep at night. My conscience has been bothering me, so enclosed you'll find a check for \$600. P.S. If I still can't sleep, I'll sent you the rest."

Judas's problem was worse than that, and Jesus understood it. You see, there are some sins you can forgive. There are some transgressions you can overlook. But this one, even Jesus had a problem with it. He could not deal with cheaters and thieves. You know, the only time he really got angry was at the temple with the money changers, and they were cheating people. They were charging more than the worth of the product that they produced, because they had a monopoly, and they could get by with it. The exchange rate for temple coinage was set, and they exceeded it, and Jesus knocked over the tables and ran them out with a club, saying in no uncertain terms, "You have made God's house a den of thieves." Jesus had a problem with cheaters. And then to know it was one of his own, Judas, who was a thief. Judas was stealing from them. Judas, who complained about this woman who came up and put costly oil on Jesus' feet, said that they should have taken that and sold it and used the money for the poor. Judas didn't care about the poor, he was trying to cover up an embezzlement of the money he had taken. Selling that oil could have replenished the source, therefore he wouldn't have been caught.

Jesus selected Judas as one of his own disciples, and then Jesus put Judas in charge of the money, and Judas took it. Judas did not do right. It looks like Jesus would have known that when he chose him. What was he thinking? How could he have chosen him? And even as he knew that Judas would betray him with a kiss, even then he invited Judas to the table. Jesus was associated with sinners and present with lawbreakers. Have you ever done something you knew was wrong, but you did it? Have you ever made a terrible mistake, and you couldn't get over it? Have you ever felt unforgiven, and had to live with it, the whole rest of your life, but you did? Judas didn't do right. Sometimes, neither do we. Judas didn't fit in. Yet Jesus chose him. He chose him. But we could understand all that if it turned out as it should have. But the truth is, it didn't end well. Judas was a curse to the cause. He set it back, almost took it down. It didn't end well, because Judas betrayed Jesus. Nobody wanted Jesus to be arrested and dragged off to trial. Even Pontius Pilate didn't want it. He saw nothing in the charges against Jesus, washed his hands of the whole matter. Judas betrayed Jesus. They took him in, they put him in jail, they convicted him and they put him on a cross, and it was all because Jesus made a mistake. Jesus selected the wrong disciple. There were other men and women he could have chosen instead of Judas. There were many people who followed Jesus around, and they would have made much more excellent disciples, much better than Judas. Could it have been any worse? Could the decision have been any more wrong? What was Jesus thinking?

Albert Camus, the French existentialist philosopher, once wrote, "In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there is in me an invincible summer." And Goethe adds to that sentiment, saying, "The greatest thing in the world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we're moving." In what direction we're moving. What is it about the human spirit that refuses to let the inevitable become automatic? What was it that took Jesus, in the darkest hour of his life, to gather his friends at the table for a meal, and to say to them, through the breaking of the bread and the New Covenant in his blood, that he would give his life for them, all of them, even Judas? Is it the same magnetic pull that brings us to the table once a month, to remind us that, at our very worst, we are the chosen best? Because the cross, like the tomb, is empty. Because the man who was nailed to it is not a victim, and neither are we. Because he's a victor, and so are we. Crosses, the ones we lift, we can carry. The causes, the ones we fight for, we can bear, and the crises in our lives, we can overcome them.

But sometimes we forget. Sometimes, you see, we feel unworthy, like we don't fit in, or like we don't do right, or like it doesn't end well. James Moore recalled a group of college students that established a "Who's Nobody" list. That's to counter "Who's Who." "Who's Nobody." And a woman from the midwest applied. Her name was Helen. Helen claimed to qualify for "Who's Nobody" because she'd been seeing the same psychiatrist for three years to try to work through issues of self-esteem. For three years, every week, for three years, and that psychiatrist every week still calls her Jennifer. Sometimes we feel like we're on the "Who's Nobody" list. Why did Jesus choose Judas? What was Jesus thinking? Was it the worst mistake of his life? Because you know, it's true, any one of us, any one of us in this room, we would have been better disciples. We would have done the right thing. We would have fit in with the plan. Any one of us would have been a better disciple. Judas Priest, you know what? That's the point. Jesus is still choosing disciples. It didn't end poorly. Because Jesus chose Judas, there's a place for us. Any of us could have been a disciple. Could be a disciple. Because it isn't over yet. It isn't over yet. Let us, all of us disciples break bread together on our knees.