

“Judas, What Were You Thinking?”

John 13:21-30 – March 24, 2016

INTRO: This portion of the story begins with the words, “After Jesus had said these things.” The things he had just said, were his remarks to his disciples as he washed their feet. Consequently, the story about Jesus’ betrayal is to be read, connected to the footwashing story and in the context of Jesus’ remarks about community. Perhaps that context—of people being in relationship together, makes this part of the story even more difficult to deal with and understand.

I think there are many times, in hindsight, when we may find ourselves saying, “what was I thinking?” We enjoy one or two hot cross buns on Palm Sunday, and are happy to take home a plate of extras, and then later in the day, when that plate is empty, we wonder why we ate them all—so quickly too?

We park and go into a mall and stay long enough that we leave the store by a different door and can’t find our car because we’re not even in the right section of the parking lot. Or we take off for a destination, and on the way there, or after we arrive, we wonder if it was a wise decision at all. I remember a trip to New Mexico when I drove out of Los Alamos, into the Santa Fe National Forest, hoping to see the outlines of an ancient volcano. But the further west I drove, the higher I went up into the mountains. It had snowed the night before, and this high road took me into an area which hadn’t been plowed or sanded. I soon found myself in my little rented Aveo roller skate car, trying to stay in the two tracks which others had made, and wondering if his trip was a good choice at all. To top things off, I knew my cell phone didn’t work up there. I eventually found a place to turn around and headed back down the mountain. Later that day, I found myself saying, “what was I thinking?”

Most of these situations may not cause great hardships or problems. But there are times when a lot more is at stake. What were we thinking when we said something totally out of line to the boss? Or what were we thinking when we were so insensitive to a friend’s feelings? Our words and our actions can have big consequences.

“The accomplishments and achievements of a person’s entire lifetime can be overshadowed or even obliterated by a single incident. (Many may) know Richard Nixon for one reason: Watergate. And which of us knows anything about the actor John Wilkes Booth apart from the fact that he shot Abraham Lincoln? What we may know about Judas was that he betrayed Jesus.” (Period.)
(The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot-A New Look at Betrayer & Betrayed, Bart Ehrman)

Just what might Judas have been thinking as he betrayed his leader? A novel about Judas, written by British author Jeffrey Archer, was published a few years back which gives a fictionalized account of Judas, ostensibly written by his son. The book imagines him as a politician who betrays Jesus, not for money, but because of the belief that Jesus is an ineffective leader, unable to challenge the authority of the Romans. Yes it’s a novel, but the author worked with a biblical scholar and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who recorded the audio version of the novel said he finds it both riveting and plausible. *(The Gospel According to Judas, Jeffrey Archer & Francis J. Moloney)*

Another resource available which gives us some insight into why Judas did what he did, is The Gospel of Judas. “The National Geographic Society published an ancient Egyptian text by that name a few years back.” The manuscript was copied sometime in the late 3rd or 4th century but it’s a copy of a 2nd century original. The manuscript had first been discovered in Egypt and it consisted of “13 sheets of papyrus written on both sides in Coptic script.” *(Homiletics, 3/07)*

Unfortunately this manuscript passed through a variety of hands, and it wasn’t cared for well. By the time somebody realized what the document was, it had deteriorated into more than 1000 pieces. There are enough fragments though, to let us know that in The Gospel of Judas, Judas is said to betray Jesus because he believes that’s what Jesus wants him to do. This ancient text lost for 1,700 years says Christ's betrayer was his truest disciple. In this version of the story, “Judas is not a demon inspired or money grabbing betrayer of the cause, but he is the one disciple who both understood Jesus and did his will.” (Bart Ehrman)

“Jesus is described as someone who considered himself a spirit trapped in a physical body” and Judas is the one who, in betraying him, frees him. *(Homiletics, 3/07)*

The Gospel of Judas is what we call a Gnostic text. It’s one of those early books that didn’t make it into the canon of our Bible, and in it, secret knowledge is given to someone, in this case, to Judas. (Bart Ehrman)

“Judas performed the greatest service imaginable. His betrayal was not the act of a traitor to the cause. It was a kind deed performed for the sake of his Lord. He turned Jesus over to the authorities so that Jesus could be killed and escape the confines of his body.” (Bart Ehrman)

Researchers don't view the discovery of The Gospel of Judas as challenging the New Testament version. Rather it is seen as a reflection of a philosophy from the early Christian era. It contributes to our knowledge of the Gnostic movement. Some early Christians were Gnostics, and many religion specialists maintain that this book will help reveal the diversity that existed in early Christianity before doctrines were formalized and settled. (*The Wired Word* 4/16/06)

The Gospel of Judas presents an interesting premise, and there are probably those in the scholarly world who would add much more to the discussion. I am intrigued to think there is still much we can learn from ancient manuscripts that are yet to be discovered, but as someone who regularly turns to the books which made it into the canon we have come to know as the Bible, I must say, I still put more credence in them. Even these Gospels portray Judas in a variety of ways: that he was motivated by greed. He was the treasurer of the disciples' common money box. He had access to that purse, and is said to have simply taken what he wanted. In John's gospel, the motivation for Judas' betrayal isn't that “Jesus made him do it” but that “the devil made him do it.” Before they had ever gathered together that night to eat supper and wash feet, it's said that the devil was already working on Judas.

There is a classical painting of “The Last Supper” by Peter Paul Rubens in a museum in Milan, where Judas is as much the center of attention as Jesus is. Judas is facing front, facing away from all the other disciples gathered around the table. Ruben's portrayal of this night, has Judas perhaps looking pensive, or with a kind of wild worried expression on his face, while others are shocked to hear Jesus say someone will betray him. A wild-eyed Judas seems right on target to me, in light of what he was going to do. I would think he would have wanted to place the blame someplace else, rather than on his head. Like many of us, he wouldn't have wanted to take responsibility for what he was doing, so to say that the devil—a power outside of himself was at work, could be his way out.

“A few decades ago, comedian Flip Wilson, while in the guise of the comic character Geraldine, would tell of some outrageous thing she'd done, and then excuse it by saying, ‘The devil made me do it.’” (*Homiletics*, 3/07)

We'd laugh because we knew how ridiculous it all was. And maybe when we think about it seriously, we know how crazy it is to think that a power outside Judas—the devil, was to blame for the choice he made. I for one, have come to think of that as an excuse. It's a whole lot easier to blame the devil—this being outside us, than to name ourselves as the responsible one. I personally don't want to give that kind of power to the devil.

What does seem to be clear, at least from John's Gospel, is that whether Judas was ruled by the devil, he wasn't yet ruled by the spirit of Jesus. “Despite all the time Judas had spent in Jesus' company, he hadn't yet committed his will to Jesus.” (*Homiletics*, 3/07)

“Sometime in the last century, an American journalist traveled to China to report on several wars that were going on there at the time. She watched a Catholic nun cleansing the awful sores on the wounded soldiers, which was a repulsive job. The journalist said, ‘I wouldn't do that for a million dollars.’ Without pausing in her work, the nun replied, ‘Neither would I.’ Both of them were talking about motivation (what it was that made them do what they did). But the nun was alluding to a commitment made earlier in her life. (The decision she had made to follow Christ's leading) was the basis for why, when the need presented itself, she went to work caring for the wounded. She wouldn't do that for a million dollars—for money, but she'd do it because she was committed to Christ.” (*Homiletics*, 3/07)

No matter what was Judas' motivation, no matter what he might have been thinking as he sat at that meal and then later on left to do what he was going to do, the more important issue for us is what makes us do what we do? So, yes, we can take a look at some of these books about Judas and find a few new insights. But know that whatever his motivation, we may never know for sure. For ourselves though, I believe we are to take responsibility for our actions, and most of all, to be motivated by Jesus Christ, who invites us to commit our lives to him and his ways.

--Sue Burwell