

Loved Anyway

The news out of the other Washington has been almost impossible to ignore this week. Once again, we have seen the spectacle of a powerful, well-to-do, white man put in the position of defending himself before his peers because of the accusations of a woman from his past. But this sermon has very little to do with Brett Kavanaugh and his insistence that “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” Oh, wait; sorry... that was Bill Clinton. Yeah, just in case we’ve forgotten that no political party has the market cornered on sexual impropriety and perjury. But I digress...

What I do want to talk about this morning is this odd triptych of a passage from Timothy Slemmons “Year D” lectionary. In attempting to present the stories of Jesus’ passion in the weeks leading up to Advent, Rev. Dr. Slemmons has assigned to this Sunday a story from the Gospel According to John that seems to be three stories in one. The overall setting is of the final Seder Jesus shared with his disciples, a story told very differently in the Fourth Gospel from the Synoptics. In the first third of the passage, we hear the interaction between Jesus and Judas, before the latter leaves to keep his appointment with Caiaphas and the other plotters against Jesus’ life. Then, we have the issuance of Jesus’ “New Commandment.” Finally, we have Jesus’ prediction that Peter, perhaps his closest friend, will deny him three times.

I’ve started thinking of the structure of this passage as a “love sandwich.” Does that sound too fanciful? How many of you like a good ham on rye with mustard? I think the popularity of that combination lies in how the combination of flavors tickles our taste buds with highly contrasting sensations. The sweet ham (unless you are eating the salty, country variety) is contrasted with the tangy, sour, even bitter tastes of the rye bread and mustard. In the same way, the author of John’s Gospel gives us a sandwich in which the sweetness of Jesus’ love is sandwiched by the bitterness of betrayal and denial. It makes for a memorable reading.

Let’s start our look at the passage by thinking about the rye bread and mustard. We’ve gotten so used to the bitterness of Judas’ story that it’s easy for us to forget how shocking it must have been to the disciples in the immediate aftermath of Jesus’ execution. We need to remember that of all the men and women who followed Jesus, listened to his teaching, asked for healing, there were only seventy that he commissioned to go and spread his teaching and only twelve that he called to be in his inner circle. Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, was one of these. In fact, so trusted was he by Jesus and the others that he served as their treasurer. Think of the women and men who’ve served this congregation in handling our money. Since I’ve been here, Marty Hightower and Mark Sutton have been the only men. The women have included Joan Hightower, Karen Heys, Jayne Bloomberg, Lee Campbell, Jennifer Gage, and Sandy Smith. These are folks we trust. I think we can safely assume, as most New Testament scholars do, that any references in the gospels to Judas being a thief came from opinions formed about him after the crucifixion. The hip kids call this “retconning,” a portmanteau word made from the phrase “retroactive continuity.” It comes from the world of comic books and soap operas, when a character’s accepted backstory is rewritten to explain a new wrinkle in the plot. “Judas the thief,” we should remember, was “retconned” from “Judas, one of the twelve.”

We have no idea what caused Judas to do what he did, nor will we, this side Jordan. There have been a number of interesting theories offered over the two millennia since his treachery, including John’s assessment that, “After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him.”

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And whether Judas acted as he did because either God or Satan used him unwittingly, two options I'd reject, or because he was disenchanted with Jesus and his concept of messiahship, or because he was trying to get Jesus to reveal himself, or because he and Jesus had cooked up the idea together (again, not a theory that holds water for me), any of these options are in many ways immaterial. Judas, one of Jesus' close friends, betrayed him unto death, possibly for money, and that is a bitter story indeed.

One of the remarkable points of this story, and it has its full telling only in John, is the significance of the sop, the piece of bread dipped into sauce during dinner. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus remarks that the one who will betray him has dipped his bread into the same bowl as Jesus at dinner. In the Fourth Gospel, however, the sop is actually given to Judas by Jesus and witnessed by "the disciple Jesus loved," presumably John himself. The late Rev. Dr. William E. Hull, writing for the Broadman Bible Commentary, notes: "In the social custom of that day it was a mark of special favor for the host to dip bread in the sauce and personally serve a guest." Jesus, who knew what Judas was up to, does not call him out publicly. Instead, he performs a gesture that Judas must have recognized as saying, "You are my special friend and I love you." Even his words, "Do quickly what you are going to do," offer Judas a chance to reverse course. We are beginning to get a hint of the flavor of the inside of the sandwich.

Likewise, the other side of the sandwich is as bitter as mustard and rye to the sensitive palette. Again, imagine the shock among the disciples when Jesus, who has kept his interaction with Judas private, says in front of them all that Peter will deny him three times. Peter, of course, was not just a member of the Twelve; he was their leader, although this was apparently unrecognized by the Sons of Thunder, James and John. If you sit down and read one of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, or Luke, straight through (they're all short), you can't escape the dominance of Peter among the apostles. Add Acts and it's even clearer, at least until Paul shows up. Of course, Simon Peter is one of those guys who acts or speaks first and thinks about it later. I've always thought Jesus gave him the nickname "Peter, the Rock" as a sort of in-joke. If ever there was a human manifestation of shifting sands, it was Simon, son of Jonas. But, again, I hear no accusation in Jesus' words to him, only affection and a wry amusement. Like the ongoing betrayal of Judas, the anticipated denial of Peter, bitter though it must have been, is tinged with the sweetness of love.

That's the middle of the sandwich, remember: Jesus' proclamation of his glorification and his commandment to love. In some ways, this is a very straightforward teaching from Jesus but in some ways it seems complex, even confusing. We can certainly understand that Jesus is emphasizing to his disciples that they must love one another. That seems very direct, very simple in expression, if difficult to always follow. We understand that Jesus puts the force of a commandment on this charge to his disciples. It is not a request, it is not optional. We call the anniversary of the day of his final Seder "Maundy Thursday" in the Church calendar, a slurring of the Latin word in this verse for commandment, "mandatum." We remember that Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another; again, simple enough. But what did he mean by calling this a "new commandment"? Surely, this is just another form of the commandment in Leviticus 19:18, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." How can Jesus rephrase a commandment he has previously cited as part of the summation of the law and the teachings of the prophets and call it new? What is the difference, subtle in our eyes and ears, between the old

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and the new that Jesus finds so crucial? I believe it is this: Jesus said, “Just as I have loved you...”

“Just as I have loved you...” Jesus calls on his disciples to love one another in the same way in which he has loved them and he lays this responsibility on them only moments after one of his dear friends, has left the Seder dinner to go and betray him to the authorities, who will surely kill him. Jesus knows he is going to die. He does not wish to die but he understands that this is the ultimate act of love for him to perform on behalf of his friends. He is willing to die so that they (and we) may live because he loves them so. And now he says to them, and to us, “love one another just as I have loved you.”

How many of us, I wonder, would be willing to die for someone else? For our children, perhaps, or grandchildren or spouse? For our nearest and dearest? How many of us would be willing to die for a fellow disciple, for one of our brothers and sisters in Christ? For someone in this room? For a member of the church down the street? For a member of a church in the next town? For a Christian on the other side of the world? “Love one another as I have loved you” is a world apart from “love your neighbor as you love yourself;” it is a new thing entirely. It is one thing to esteem another human being as well as we consider ourselves; to hold their desires as important as our own. But to love so much that we are willing to die for them, to put the needs of others above our own... And yet that is exactly what Jesus calls us to do.

But perhaps we are off the hook. After all, just before giving this command, Jesus says, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” He must know that we cannot live up to his command! He surely cannot expect us to follow after him in giving our all for others. But just a few verses later, Jesus says, “I go to prepare a place for you... and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” We cannot go where Jesus has gone when we are holding on to our old lives. We cannot cling to what we see as our rights and still love one another as Jesus loves us. But by going ahead of us, Jesus is preparing for us, preparing by sending the Holy Spirit to fill us with God’s love, not only so we can enter the presence of God after we die but so we can live in God’s will and show God’s love in this world.

This command to love so unselfishly, remember, comes immediately after Judas leaves the room to trigger the process that leads to Jesus’ death. Even before Jesus takes the opportunity to give his disciples this command, he reflects on what Judas’ action means for him. “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.” It seems like another odd thing to say but listen to the writing of Rev. Dr. J. Barry Vaughn: “For us glory is about having more: more money, more prestige, more power. For Jesus, glory was about giving more.” Vaughn recalls the opening of John’s Gospel, which says, “we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” Vaughn writes, “The Word Incarnate heals the sick, feeds the multitude, raises the dead, and finally completes his task by dying on the cross...” That is how we beheld his glory, through his giving, even to his own life.

Jesus commands us to love one another as he loved us, to love one another enough to give everything, even our lives, for one another. It sounds ridiculous on the face of it, does it not? Patently absurd. But remember the words of Paul to the Corinthians: “we preach Christ

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crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” And, I would add, Christ, the love of God.

We must recall, my brothers and my sisters, that it is the glory of God, the self-giving glory of Christ, that we seek to reflect to the world. We must recall that the Holy Spirit, sent to us as counsellor and comforter following the ascension of Jesus, empowers us to love in the way of Jesus, self-giving rather than self-centered, loving not just our friends but even those who betray and deny us. And we must recall, I think, that even if we’ve not betrayed someone like Judas, we’ve very likely proved false friend at some point in our lives like Peter. Even the most well-meaning among us has inadvertently hurt a friend. It’s also worth remembering those rather scandalous words of Brother Will Campbell. Do you remember the story? In his first memoir, Brother to a Dragonfly, Campbell recalled how his friend P. D. East had badgered him for a succinct definition of Christianity. East did not want a long or fancy explanation. “I’m not too bright,” he told Campbell. “Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what’s the Christian message?” Said Brother Will, “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway.”

Judas, the betrayer, was loved anyway. Peter, the denier, was loved anyway. We, for all our faults and mishaps and sins of commission and omission, planned or simply thoughtless, we are loved anyway. And so we are called to “love anyway” as well. If you are not on Facebook you will not have seen it but earlier this week I reposted a meme similarly reposted by a friend from seminary days. It was a quote from the great Catholic lay-worker for justice, Dorothy Day. She wrote, “I really only love God as much as the person I love the least.” I find that to be a remarkable challenge, don’t you? In this day of polarized politics, I can think of a number of people that I find it hard to love. But Day reminds me, just as Will Campbell does, that I am called to love them anyway because I am loved anyway. Regardless of how abhorrent I find the policies and pronouncements of Donald Trump, regardless of how appalled I may be by the accusations against Brett Kavanaugh, regardless of how hard I work against injustices perpetrated by those in power, I am called to love them anyway because I am loved anyway. And so are we all. It is so tempting to join in the chorus of social media in excoriating those with whom we disagree but what does that do for our witness of Christ’s love for the world? How can they know us by our love when all they hear or see is our condemnation, our disdain, or our outright hatred? We can’t claim to guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride and join in the angry voices on Twitter or Facebook. I confess; I have been guilty. Pray for me to do better, please.

Let us turn our eyes, one final time this morning, to the story of Jesus. He knew Judas would betray him; he loved him anyway. He knew Peter would falter at the moment of crisis; he loved him anyway. He loves us anyway and he calls on us to love as he loved: selflessly, fully, forgivingly. As we sing, let us again ask that the Holy Spirit would so fill us now that the world would see and know us as the followers of Jesus because of our love. Amen.