

“Betrayed”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 17, 2024

5th Sunday in Lent

Psalm 126

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 14:10-21

Introduction

As, on our calendars, we approach the events of Holy Week – beginning seven days from now, on Palm Sunday – our readings from Mark over that past several weeks have taken place in those days immediately before Jesus is arrested and tried, crucified and buried. What seems to set everything in motion is the betrayal of Jesus, and – from back in chapter 3, when Mark lists the names of the disciples – we know who the betrayer will be: Judas Iscariot.

Chapter 14 begins with a note about the plot by the chief priests and scribes to kill Jesus, then describes the woman who, while at a dinner in Bethany, anoints Jesus’ head with expensive oil; which Jesus explains to the disciples is a preparation for his burial. Mark therefore sets up three parties: the people who want to kill Jesus (like the religious leaders), people who honor him (like the woman in Bethany), and people who do not understand him (like the disciples). Mark seems to be asking his audience, *to which party do you belong?*

Read Mark 14:10-21

Unlike Judas Iscariot, the woman who anoints Jesus with expensive oil is left unnamed. Because of the resources that the onlookers believed her to have squandered – perfume at an estimated value that would have covered a day laborer’s wages for one full year – she was the object of their scorn. Defending the woman’s extravagant gift, Jesus interprets the beautiful thing she has done for him: anticipating his burial, this is an act that will be remembered whenever Jesus’ story is told.

Often, we participate in the same kind of judgement that the woman in Bethany received. We think that we know – even if we don’t say it out loud – how people should be spending their money. We wonder how someone struggling with housing can afford those fancy clothes, or we question why someone’s clothes seem not to match the occasion.

Sometimes, these speculations are harmless; we are just stating our preferences. Other times, though, we judge in order to separate ourselves from others; to proclaim what team we belong to and make it clear who is not a part of our team.

Mark seems to make it clear, as this passion narrative begins with the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, that everyone in the story – save maybe this unnamed woman who selflessly offers what she has to Jesus – is complicit; that no-one is so innocent that they should be judging others to be the ones guilty or responsible.

Immediately following the dinner in Bethany, Mark introduces the betrayal. While the woman spends her money on Jesus, Judas will receive money for himself from the chief priests. We are not told why Judas chooses to do this – out of greed or frustration or because Satan tempted him. Mark does not tell us whether Judas always intended to betray Jesus, or whether the anointing – with that apparent waste of perfume – suddenly caused him to reject Jesus’ mission and message.

Nor does Mark tell us whether, when he appointed Judas to be among the twelve, Jesus knew about the betrayal. As author AJ Levine says:

How we understand Judas impacts the way we understand Jesus: did Jesus appoint Judas to facilitate the betrayal? If he did, is Jesus partially responsible for Judas’ actions?

Alternately, is Judas himself possessed by Satan, which is what both Luke and John propose, such that his actions are not his own?

Another explanation for the handing over is to see Judas as attempting to motivate Jesus to act...Is Judas trying to get him to publicly state he is the Son of David, the king of Israel?¹

For the passion story to move forward, Mark seems to be indicating; for the arrest and trial of Jesus to take place, Jesus must be handed over to the authorities. The Greek word used here for “betray” – *paradidomi* – literally means “hand over.” In I Corinthians, Paul speaks of handing over the teachings that he had received. When we hand over, or pass along, whatever we have heard – teachings, news, or gossip – we might question whether we are being faithful transmitters or betraying the source.

Jesus has arranged to celebrate the Passover and, when it was evening, he gathered to eat with the twelve disciples. Judas’ meeting with the chief priests has gone undetected by the other disciples. But Jesus soon betrays Judas’ secret, saying: “one of you will betray me; one who is eating with me.” (v. 18)

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*, p. 132

Instead of taking Judas aside to confront him, Jesus seems to be asking all twelve about their commitment to him: will they stay faithful or not? Though only Judas took money in a plot to hand Jesus over, the rest of the disciples will scatter out of fear. Even Peter will deny his Lord three times. It seems that we are all capable of loyalty or betrayal, good or evil to some degree.

Jesus knew that he would be betrayed, and – though he does not single Judas out publicly – he knows who would betray him. Should Jesus have said something, or done something?

Mark does not tell us when Judas leaves to tell the chief priests where they can find Jesus. But eventually, the group departs for the Mount of Olives, where Jesus tells them they will all stumble. Peter insists not only that he will remain faithful, but that even if he must die with him, he will never deny Jesus. Mark notes that all the disciples said the same; Judas, if he has not left yet, would have been among the group.²

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays in agony, knowing that he will be crucified. Three times, he asks his inner circle of disciples – Peter, James, and John – to keep watch with him; three times they fall asleep. Finally, he rouses them and, spotting Judas – who is standing among the chief priests, elders, scribes, and a crowd with swords and clubs – Jesus says, “see, my betrayer is at hand.” (v, 42)

In this last appearance of Judas in Mark’s gospel, Judas runs up to Jesus, greets him as “Rabbi” and gives him a kiss. This was the signal, pre-arranged with the authorities, for them to put their hands on Jesus and seize him. The betrayal, the handing over, is complete and Judas fades from the scene. According to Matthew, Judas threw his thirty pieces of silver in the Temple and hung himself. But, in Mark, there is no mention of Judas collecting the money; his fate remains open.

Like the unnamed woman in the story that preceded this betrayal, Judas provides a warning against judging others, especially when we do not understand their motives. In Judas, we are provided an opportunity to consider the extent and the limits of forgiveness and reconciliation. Judas also raises questions about Jesus’ complicity in allowing the betrayal to go forward; part of a larger conversation about why a good and gracious God allows evil in the world.

Despite the promises we make, we all – at some point – fall short. The question is how we fail. Do we like Judas, never look back; never make a change? Or, instead, like Peter, do we feel regret and experience repentance?

During our time in Montreat this week, we heard from two new Black Mountain School faculty members – both originally from Central America – who spoke about their

² Levine, p. 136

work helping to organize farm workers for fairer and safer conditions. We learned about the field of *popular or participatory education*: the practice of listening to everyone's voice, and especially those who experience the greatest oppression, to discern plans for collective action. We were reminded about the importance of talking honestly about history and were introduced to some tools that will help us to research, educate, and act for greater justice.

What is a Thriving Congregation? For so long, we have tried to measure it by numbers; whether baptisms or programs or square footage; people in worship, or dollars in the offering plate. We were reminded that, instead, according to the work we are doing – deepening the relationships within the church while broadening the connections with our community – thriving congregations are known by these three markers: 1) asking questions and being willing to learn; 2) a willingness to engage in the public square; and 3) being vulnerable by taking risks; stepping outside comfort zones.

Having spent many months intentionally listening to the voices of people within and beyond the walls of this congregation, we are now starting to utilize these tools to assess the assets and issues of our community, and where God is calling us to join in works of healing, justice, and repair. This is a *theology of liberation*: freedom from the forces and conditions of oppression, yes, but also from the ways we fall short in keeping the promises we make to God and each another.

Sometimes, our mistakes lie in failing to listen to the voices of those most oppressed or overlooked; in judging others without truly understanding their motives; and in assuming that we know best how they should utilize their material or spiritual resources.

Much like the twelve disciples, sometimes, we are the ones who just do not understand; we are not in a position to judge. And so, at Jesus' own invitation, let us ask questions, let us be willing to engage with each other and our community, and let us be vulnerable enough to take risks, so that – in God's mercy – all might be free. Amen.