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## *Where's Judas?*

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**A sermon by the Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.  
The Fifth Sunday After Easter - Year C**

I have a friend who was only twelve years old when she lost her mother.

Her mother knew that she was going to die and she knew that my friend's father would not be able to care for their three children. He was already suffering from a crippling disease of his own, and it was only going to get worse.

So, her mother turned to friends that she trusted and asked them to raise her children. And, they did, loving these children just as they did their own.

But, that would not be the end of the story. My friend was only sixteen when her father died. And, before she was twenty-five, the friends of her parents who raised her were killed in a tragic car accident.

My friend has a brother and a sister.

They are all interestingly different from each other. Over time, they have moved to different parts of the country. They have taken up very different kinds of lives. And, of course, they have experienced the kinds of frictions that such differences create.

Yet, in so many ways, they have laid down their lives for each other. They have always believed in each other. They have always kept faith with each other. They have always trusted each other. They have always been loyal to each other.

And, whenever it seems like one is slipping away, the others have always reached out in some way and brought them back.

Their commitment to each other, their covenant with each other, seems to be rooted in their shared experience of loss, and how they have reacted to it. Their parents live on, I think, in the love that these siblings have for each other.

I imagine that my friend's mother felt exactly what Jesus felt in John's telling of the last supper.

Judas has just gone out into the night. Jesus turns to the others and, in the words a mother might use, says, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. ... Where I am going, you cannot come." (Jn. 13: 33).

He is trying to prepare them for something that they cannot possibly understand, for a disorienting experience of pain and loss that they can't possibly imagine. They will be challenged to bring order out of the chaos that is about to consume them. They will have to depend on each other to imagine what their new life might look like.

"I give you a new commandment," he continues, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another." (Jn. 13: 34)

"Stick together," he seems to be saying. "Learn to depend on each other." Jesus knows that, in so many different ways, they will have to lay down their lives for each other. They will have to believe in each other. They will have to keep faith with each other. They will have to trust each other. They have to remain loyal to each other.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," he concludes, "if you have love for one another." (Jn. 13: 35)

It is as if he is saying, "this is what we do in our family. This is what it means to be one of us." He knows that new life will arise out of their commitment to each other, their covenant with each other. Their identity will be rooted in their shared experience of loss, and how they react to it.

And, in a way that they can't yet understand, Christ will always be with them. Their love for each other will reveal his presence. It will, as John says, glorify him. He will be in them and they will be in him, just as he is in the Father and the Father is in him.

Jesus showed the disciples exactly what this kind of motherly love looks like in the way that he reached out to Peter and brought him back into the group.

It was Peter, you will remember, who confidently vowed at the Last Supper that he would lay down his life for Jesus. Yet, after Jesus' arrest the next day, Peter betrayed his best friend while standing around a charcoal fire at the high priest's house. Just as Jesus had predicted, Peter denied any association with his Lord before the cock had crowed three times. (Jn. 18:18)

Yet, this is not the end of the story.

Jesus appeared to Peter on the beach in Galilee, again around a charcoal fire. As if to undo Peter's three denials, the Christ asked Peter three times if he loved him. The first two times, Peter said yes, but to a different kind of love than Jesus has proposed. The third time, Jesus changed the question, asking Peter for the kind of love that Peter was able to give. (Jn. 21: 15-19)

Jesus reached out to Peter and found a way to bring him back into the group.

Have you ever wondered, though, why we don't have any stories about anyone reaching out to Judas?

We don't have any stories about anyone following Judas out into the night after the Last Supper or reaching out to him after he brought the soldiers to Gethsemane? We don't have any stories about anyone offering to be with Judas<sup>1</sup> in all of his shame, and guilt, and humiliation.

We seem to have accepted that Judas is beyond the reach of forgiveness.

Our Scriptures demonize him.

His name has become synonymous with deception and betrayal.

Even our liturgies ritualize our disdain for his treachery.

It lies there quietly, just below the surface. Listen closely to the Celebrant, as she prepares us all for communion. Notice the subtle reference to Judas as she raises the host for all to see and describes Christ as having done something similar on "the night he was handed over to suffering and death." (BCP, 362)

I have been thinking about Judas this week.

I recognized him in the face of Boston Marathon bombing suspect, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

As I listened to TV commentators argue that he be water-boarded and stripped of his constitutional rights, and that all Muslims and their places of worship should be treated with suspicion, I knew that it was him.

The talk wasn't about whether he did what he is accused of doing, or even what the appropriate punishment might be. It wasn't even about how we might deal with our own fear or anger. It was about how he wasn't one of us, about how he wasn't worthy of being treated the way that we treat our own.

I realized, then, that Judas is not just a person who has committed an evil act. That would justifiably provoke our fear and anger.

Judas is a face that we create. As our fear and anger ripen into hatred, Judas is the one we choose to hate.

Once I realized that Judas is a face that we create, someone we choose to hate. I began to see him in other places too.

Divorces that leave once intimate partners unable to talk to each other.

Church fights that leave once faithful parishioners unable to share in bread and wine of Christ's body together.

Political battles that leave public servants once committed to the public good unable to support anything that the other has proposed.

Our hatred always seems justified. It always appears to be grounded in the facts. The evil behavior seems to speak for itself.

But, it's more than that. Our fear and anger may be justified, but our hatred is not.

The Judas we create is just a means to a spiritual end. It says more about us than it does about them.

By putting Judas beyond forgiveness, we make ourselves feel more secure, even closer to God. This is, of course, just what the atheists complain about when they attack religion for engendering hatred.

We don't have any stories about anyone going after Judas, I think, because we are afraid to find Judas. We are afraid that we will lose our seats at the table if he is allowed to reclaim his.

Go back to John's telling of the Last Supper, though. Jesus issues his love commandment just after Judas gets up from the table and leaves the room.

"Love one another," he said. "Just as I have loved you, you should love one another." (Jn. 13: 34)

It sounds like a mother hen to me, longing to gather up her brood under her wings.

He tells them just what that will look like.

It will look like my friend and her siblings.

They will have to lay down their lives for each other. They will have to believe in each other. They will have to keep faith with each other. They will have to trust each other. They will have to be loyal to each other.

And, when one of them seems like he is slipping away, the others will have to reach out and bring them back. They are never beyond forgiveness. There is nothing that can separate them from the love of God.

In other words, they will have to find Judas.

They will have to deal with their fear and anger in a way that does not ripen into hatred. They will have to realize that getting closer to God is more about finding a way to raise someone else up, than putting them down.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," Jesus said, "if you have love for each other." (Jn. 13:35)

The banquet has been prepared. The table is set and many of the guests have already arrived. But, one chair is empty.

Where is Judas?

We can't start without him.

The family won't be complete until he arrives.

The presence of Christ won't be fully revealed until we are sitting at the table with the one who betrayed us.

Amen.

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You might be interested to know:

- I got the idea of searching for Judas from Frederick Niedner, who makes the connection in his essay "Proclaiming a Crucified Eschaton," (Institute for Liturgical Studies, Valparaiso University, 1998), pages 10 - 14.
- After I preached this sermon, Canon Charles Roper told me about an old legend regarding Judas. Here is a version of it told by Madeleine L'Engle in her "Waiting for Judas."

There is an old legend that, after his death, Judas found himself at the bottom of a deep and slimy pit. For thousands of years he wept his repentance, and when the tears were finally spent he looked up and saw, way, way up, a tiny glimmer of light. After he had contemplated it for another thousand years or so, he began to try to climb up towards it. The walls of the pit were dank and slimy, and he kept slipping back down. Finally, after great effort, he neared the top, and then he slipped and fell all the way back down. It took him many years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of grief and repentance, and then he started to climb up again. After many more falls and efforts and failures he reached the top and dragged himself into an upper room with twelve people seated around a table. "We've been waiting for you, Judas," Jesus said. "We couldn't begin till you came."