
The Betrayal of Love

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday – Year C

Peter, James, John, Judas, the twelve, Pontius Pilate, the soldiers, the women standing at a distance, the crowds.

What do all these people have in common?

Yes, of course; many of them were followers of Jesus. But, on this day, Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion, the beginning of Holy Week, we observe a similarity among all of these characters.

They were all, all of them, betrayers of Jesus.

I remember when we, in the church, began organizing dramatic readings of this long passion gospel. We distributed the roles, and someone was assigned to be Jesus, and someone was assigned to be Peter. Some people wondered who got to be Jesus; and some people wondered who got to be Peter, or, rather, who might be forced to play Peter. When the actor portraying Peter denied Jesus three times, we all wondered how that actor did it so convincingly. Some of us were glad that the most ornery, mischievous boy in the class played that role – just as it should be, we thought.

But, then, the church started asking the congregation to play a role. We asked the congregation to play the part of the huge crowd, the crowd that shouts “Hosannah” at first, but the crowd who ends up shouting, at the end, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

I remember hearing the angry complaint of one older woman in the parish who was quite upset. “I resent,” she said, “coming to church and having to shout, ‘Crucify him!’ That is not me. I will not be the one shouting ‘Crucify him.’”

Oh, but she *is* the one. Oh, but we *are* the ones. We *all* have that in common; we are betrayers of Jesus.

There is no one, no not one, who escapes conviction in the story of Jesus’ passion. If we believe we are above betrayal, then we have not understood the story. Betrayal is the character of all of us, at some point or another. All of us, men and women together. White, black, straight, gay, supposedly good and supposedly bad. There is no person, and no identity group, who escapes the guilt of betrayal.

All the followers of Jesus have this in common. We are all capable of betrayal, and we are all betrayers. At some level, we have fallen short. At some level, we have failed to witness to the love and truth of Jesus. At some level, we have missed the mark.

But there is still another similarity that the followers of Jesus share in common. All of us, good and bad, intentional or not intentional, are also *loved* by Jesus. Every character in today’s story—Peter, James, John, Judas, the crowd—is also loved by Jesus.

What is Jesus doing, loving those who would not love him? What is Jesus doing, forgiving those who have betrayed him? What is Jesus doing, giving himself over to those whom he knows will fall short of honoring and respecting him?

The word “betray” means to hand over. It’s the word used over and over again in this passion story. “To give over.” Jesus says the one who will hand him over has his hand on the table. Judas, with a kiss, hands Jesus over. Pilate hands over Jesus. They all hand over Jesus.

But there is another level of so-called “betrayal” going on in today’s gospel. *Jesus hands something over, too.* Jesus hands over himself.

Yes, Jesus gives himself over. Jesus gives himself to those whom he knows will stumble in love, to those who will give up at the last moment of love. Jesus betrays himself, hands himself over to those who would abuse and dishonor him.

What is this? What wondrous love is this, that hands itself over to dishonor?

There is a way Jesus could have escaped! He could simply have refused to hand himself over. He could have not given himself to the authorities. In fact, he could have not given himself over to Judas. Hey, he could have not given himself over to Peter and James and John, and the other disciples, and the crowd. He could have refused to be committed to any of them! I mean, ...any of us.

In each of our lives, in the lives of you and me, there is a way to avoid suffering and pain. There is a way, for each of us, not to be hurt in love, or to ever be betrayed at all. And that other way is simply not to love, not to let ourselves fall in love, not to give ourselves to other people. We certainly would never get hurt that way, would we? We could never love at all, instead of risking to lose in love.

But, Jesus is Lord—we call Jesus “Lord”—we call Jesus “Divine”—because Jesus does give himself over in love. His action is the noble reminder of that smaller little ditty that we sometimes say, “Better to have lost in love, than never to have loved at all.”

Today, when we hear the betrayals of Jesus, is why we honor Jesus as Lord. Because Jesus gives himself over to those who will fall short. Jesus loves those who will not, and cannot, love him as honorably in return. Jesus loves us, who will always find another way to fall short.

The ultimate act of handing over, then, is not the action of Jesus’s disciples. It is Jesus himself who performs the ultimate act of handing over. It is Jesus who is the ultimate betrayer; he hands himself over. He hands himself over to the rambling and inconsistent and erratic love of his followers, over and over again. Jesus hands himself over to the risk of love.

Those of us who want to follow the love of Jesus are shown today the fierce betrayals of love. Love means giving ourselves over to others, even when they will not be able to love us back – at least not in the way we always want that love reciprocated. The people we love are the people who can hurt us the most. The people we love can be the people who damage us the most.

But that does not mean that we refuse to love. We could refuse. We could say, as Jesus strangely and weariedly wondered on the way to the Cross, we could say, like him, “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed” (Luke 23:29). We could say, “let’s stay away from those kinds of commitments, those kinds of risks.” We could say, “Let’s avoid relationship.”

But that is not the nature of love. The nature of love is to give ourselves to birth, to nurturing, to giving, over and over again. The nature of love is to give ourselves over to relationship, to risk intimate relationship. The nature of love is to hand ourselves over to the betrayals of love.

So, in this Passion Story of Jesus, where we hear, again and again, how his followers hand him over, betray him, give him up – well, we also hear, again and again, how Jesus hands himself over, gives himself up, over and over again, to love.

The ultimate giver is Jesus. The ultimate giver-over is Jesus. If we have ears to hear it, Jesus is the ultimate betrayer, betraying himself to love, over and over again.

AMEN.

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