

*“Is it I, Lord?”*

Sermon for Community Holy Week Services

Theme: “People on the Way to the Cross – Judas”

Service held at Decatur First United Methodist Church,  
Georgia

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Holy Scriptures: John 13: 21-30

Good afternoon! I bring you greetings from the members  
and friends

of First Christian Church of Decatur.

As per usual, I was asked not to even attempt to be witty or  
charming or intellectual;

my people said, “James, just be yourself.”

Thank you, Rev. Dr. David Nagle, Rev. Katie Hinman, and  
Mr. Mitch Weisiger

for your kind invitation

and even kinder friendship and leadership in  
our fair city.

Thank you for hosting our city-wide Election Night  
Communion Service last November.

That night we had Republicans and Democrats, Liberals and  
Conservatives,

Tea Party supporters and those who said “No Tea for  
me, please,”

gathering together to Break the Bread and  
Share the Cup.

We put aside political differences and celebrated what we  
share in common:

our faith in Jesus Christ and our hope for our nation.

Yesterday I told my mother that I was planning to speak with  
you about Judas,

and that the theme for the Holy Week preaching and  
worship

is “People on the Way to the Cross”.

She said, “*Well, he didn't get very far!*”

Listen for the Word of God:

## John 13: 21-30

21 After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “**Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.**”<sup>22</sup> The disciples looked at one another uncertain of whom he was speaking.

23 One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; <sup>24</sup> Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. <sup>25</sup> So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, “**It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.**”

So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. <sup>27</sup> After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “**Do quickly what you are going to do.**”

28 Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. <sup>29</sup> Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival”; or, that he should give something to the poor.

30 So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

*This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

For as far back as I can remember

I've associated Christian faith with social responsibility.

Maybe it was because my home congregation practiced a social gospel,

believing and singing, preaching and practicing a Christian faith

that is grounded in the context of serving people in need.

Maybe it was from hearing the stories of Jesus,

stories of a suffering servant constantly, lovingly, graciously reaching out

to the lost, the last, and the least,

inviting folks into His life and inviting Himself into ours.

Maybe it was because of one Sunday without dry, uncooked macaroni and Elmer's Glue.

Let me explain.

When my brothers and I went to have church (we didn't go to church; we had church)

we would jingle the coins in our pockets for the offering in Sunday School,

and when we left church we would invariably

carry home

our arts and crafts project that we had  
made in Sunday School.

And, I swear, it was always some creative use of dry,  
uncooked macaroni

stuck with Elmer's Glue on a white paper plate,

art supposedly in the shape of Jesus or Moses,  
church steeples or sheep.

Every now and then we would expand beyond expectations

and get to make a dry, macaroni *sculpture!*...that  
rested on a white paper plate.

Or, if we were really, truly blessed,

we strung the dry, uncooked macaroni on a thread  
and made a necklace.

Then we got to proudly wear our faith around  
our neck.

So you can imagine my delight the day this nine-year-old

was told by a Sunday School teacher

that arts and crafts would not consist of mac  
and glue.

Instead everyone would get to make a personal banner,

which we would carry and show to the whole city

when we paraded next Sunday to the Easter  
Dawn Service.

My classmates each got a piece of 12” by 12” square felt cloth,  
and started to cut out egg shapes and cross shapes to  
decorate their banners.

One classmate started to make cut outs of animals going two-  
by-two into an ark,

and quickly got pulled aside by the teacher

for some additional instruction on the nuance  
of Jesus’ resurrection.

I looked at the blank piece of felt and pictured an image  
burned into my heart

from a passage of Scripture that had been read in  
church,

a passage that stuck with me and floated there  
in my mind,

being teased and played with,

quietly meditated upon as I went  
about living.

(Don’t let anyone tell you that children cannot contemplate  
theology.)

Scissors sliced through felt and there quickly emerged

an image of two right hands approaching from  
opposite sides of the banner,

each holding a piece of bread,

each preparing to dip into a common  
bowl.

When nine letters forming four words were added above,

the banner was ready for show and tell on the Day of  
Resurrection.

The next Sunday we paraded from our church

to the site of the ecumenical outdoor Easter Dawn  
Service.

We stood in a circle around the empty tomb

and then a lady stood in the middle of our circle and  
said,

*“He is not here! He is risen!”*

We sang “Christ the Lord is Risen Today!”

and I held up my little banner that asked, “Is it I,  
Lord?”

“Is it I, Lord?”

That question has legs.

“Is it I, Lord?” has stood the test of time.

Our Scriptures for today offer a conversation that is in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

In Mark and Matthew the disciples speak directly to Jesus,

asking, wondering, pleading to know whether they are the ones to betray Him.

In both Luke and John we overhear the Gospel,

observing as the troubled disciples interact and converse together.

John 13 reads: *After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared,*

*“Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.”*

*The disciples looked at one another uncertain of whom he was speaking.*

“Is it I, Lord?” still shakes us to our core.

Consider that every time we have Holy Communion

we repeat Jesus’ words at the Last Supper (1 Cor. 11: 23-24):

*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you,*

*that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was  
betrayed took bread,*

*and when he had given thanks,*

*he broke it, and said, "This is my body  
which is for you.*

*Do this in  
remembrance of  
me."*

When we gather at the Lord's Table and re-live the Last  
Supper,

the Holy Eucharist is offered to one and all with love  
and forgiving grace,

and we make sure to mention the betrayal.

We recall that on the night He was betrayed,

Jesus dipped His hands into the common bowl with a  
follower and friend

who also dipped into and shared the common  
bowl,

one who partook the Bread of Life and  
the Cup of Salvation.

We remember the betrayal...and the betrayer.

We remember the one who sold information to the  
authorities

so that they might arrest Jesus somewhere quiet,  
somewhere away from the crowds who might  
defend him.

The authorities needed someone to identify their leader,  
which tells us how common and normal our suffering  
servant leader looked.

(Possibly not as hot and hunky as he is portrayed on a  
current TV melodrama.)

We remember the one who betrayed Jesus,  
and we will not let it go  
nor do we let him back into the fold.

History is written by saints and winners;  
Judas is cast as the loser and sinner.

We tend to forget and overlook an inconvenient truth,  
that when Jesus said in the Upper Room, "*One of you  
here will betray me,*"  
everyone present said, "*Is it I, Lord?*"

We all have it in us to do incredible acts of mercy and love,  
and we have the capacity to do evil, to betray Christ  
and one another.

*“Is it I, Lord?”*

If you go to the Upper Room in Nashville,

you may sit in a lovely chapel

and admire a wooden carving of De Vinci’s Last  
Supper.

The day my family went our tour guide pointed out the  
twelve posts on the altar rail;

eleven posts were named for the disciples and one  
was for St. Paul.

What? Eleven disciples? We thought there were twelve...

There is no altar rail for Judas.

Judas has been cast out of the Upper Room;

betrayers and sinners need not apply.

When I saw that, heard that, and let it sink in,

I felt as if I, too, was cast off and cast away and cast  
aside.

They say the Church is the only army that shoots its  
wounded.

More and more often our congregation is welcoming home  
folks

who are walking wounded,

folks who feel as betrayed by the church as by

anyone else.

“Is it I, Lord?”

Are you like me, feeling far too often like the disciples at the Last Supper,

being uncertain of whom Jesus was speaking...

because he could have been speaking about me...about you...about us...

We can all relate,

for when it comes to asking Jesus whom to judge and pin the blame,

when it comes to asking God whom we can point a finger at,

we discover that four of our own fingers point right back at us.

We can all relate,

for we have known what it's like to betray someone else's trust,

and to feel betrayed by someone we trusted.

We can all relate,

for we know the pain of being undercut and undone

and burned

by those we love and put our trust in,

and we also know the pain of admitting, disclosing,  
and confessing

before God and one another that we have  
broken vows,

leaked confidences, let friends down,  
forgotten promises,

abandoned what was entrusted to  
us,

dismissed what was once a  
sacred trust.

You can only be betrayed by those whom you trust;

you can only betray others who have put their trust in  
you.

We know this pain. We know this hurt.

We have a sense of what Jesus must have felt;

we also know what Judas must have felt;

we also know what all the disciples must have  
felt

when they asked, “Is it I, Lord?”

Columbia Theological Seminary is right down the way,

that outstanding divinity school where future Sunday  
School teachers

learn how to make arts and crafts projects

out of dry, uncooked macaroni and  
Elmer’s Glue.

At Columbia here is a student dormitory that overlooks the  
school commons.

In one of the windows is a sign that reads,

“Seminary Students Please Do Not Walk On Water”

Please don’t walk on water.

Please don’t point fingers at sinners or cast away betrayers.

Please don’t be so hard on yourself; be good to you and to  
one another.

Please let Jesus forgive you and through you to forgive one  
another.

Please do remember that when Jesus returned from life after  
life

the very first thing he did was to forgive Peter and

those who had betrayed Him.

Please do make room and make space and make a home

for the lost, the last and the least,

for the abandoned and the abandoners,

the victims and the victimizers.

You and I know all too well what betrayal feels like, sounds like, smells like, hurts like,

And, yes, deep down inside we already know the answer to our question, "Is it I, Lord?"

*Yes, it's a me, Lord. It's a me, standing in the need of prayer.*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!