

Sermon

April 3, 2022

In Defense of Judas Iscariot

Pastor Dan

The original title as printed in your bulletin of today's sermon was "The Quest for the Historical Judas." That is, I was interested in finding out more about the man behind the narratives we have concerning him. Who was the real Judas and what if anything, can we say about him based upon the Biblical record?

But then around (unfortunately about 11pm) last night, I had a change of heart. Instead, I wanted to make *a case* for Judas Iscariot. I wanted to serve as his defense attorney, which is exactly what I'm going to do this morning. You, in turn, will be the jury. At the end of my case, I'm going to invite you to vote on a verdict. You'll raise your hand either, "Yes, Judas was guilty of a malicious crime" "No, Judas was not guilty of a malicious crime" or "Abstain." (You're not quite sure yet.)

Here we go. — And I would also like to say one last thing at the outset, I want to thank my pastoral colleagues in this cluster of the Synod. They and I meet every Thursday for Bible study and the conversation we had on this topic fascinated me so much, I thought, I would love to communicate what I've learned here with the rest of the congregation. So here we go:

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, members of our distinguished jury. I am here today to represent a man whose character has been wrongly maligned, perhaps more than any other figure in Western history. In Greek, he goes by the name of Iudas Iscariotes. In English, of course, you know him as Judas Iscariot, the one who supposedly betrayed Jesus Christ.

I know. I know. Why would I, a world-renowned attorney, come to the defense of such a man? After all, the prosecution told you this case is merely a formality. a slam dunk, one where no person in his right mind would ever even entertain the idea of my client's innocence, let alone prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. Here I am, eager and ready to show you, one of the world's most impartial juries, another side of my client's story.

Why? Because the very man who my client supposedly betrayed made it clear that "the truth will set us free," — free not only to reexamine the evidence we have for and against my client, but free to reexamine, if not challenge, our own assumptions regarding his guilt in the matter.

And so, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I invite you to sit back for a few minutes as I make my case for the innocence of my client, Judas Iscariot, after which I will briefly explain why it matters even now, some 2000 years after the alleged crime took place.

Now if I had been saying this that just about any other church, I might be serving my last Sunday here. But one of the things that I love about being at Queen Anne Lutheran is how open-minded people are. And so with that, I invite you to hear my case.

Now we all know the story, or at least we think we do. As John 12, our Gospel reading for today, tells us, Judas Iscariot was a disciple who would betray Jesus by handing him over to the authorities, allegedly for financial gain. Indeed, John points out in verse six that Judas chastised Mary for pouring expensive perfume on Jesus's feet, not because that money could have gone to the poor, but because Judas was a *thief*, who "kept the common purse and used it to steal what was put into it."

The prosecution, as you heard earlier, loves this little detail. "Don't you see?" they ask you, "John has established a prior motive. Judas was a thief. He possessed exactly the kind of character of someone who would betray Jesus!" But it doesn't stop there. John tells us that Satan inspired Judas to turn Jesus over to the authorities. Moreover, the prosecution added, after Jesus identifies Judas as the one who will betray him, Judas "fled into the night."

Anyone who knows John, they concluded, will recognize that the imagery of darkness has particular meaning here. Sometimes a person can be in the dark, like Nicodemus, back in chapter three, who did not understand what Jesus was teaching. Other times, darkness can be in and around a person, like Judas, who, for reasons apparently of greed, was ready to betray his master.

Of course, John was not alone in maligning my client's character, nor was he the first. The Gospel of Luke has that honor. Like John, he claims that Satan prompted Judas to betray Jesus. Unique among the Gospels, he also describes Judas explicitly as a traitor.

The prosecution, therefore, would have you believe this is an open and shut case. On the basis of two gospels, John and Luke, they would have you think my client was a thief and a traitor who was inspired by Satan to betray Jesus for a mere 30 coins of silver. While John seems content to allow my client to disappear into the night, Luke concludes that he got what he deserved. According to the first chapter of Acts, which Luke wrote as a companion piece to the Gospel, Judas acquired a field as the reward of his wickedness, only to die on the spot.

Now, let me be very clear, I am not here to dispel Luke or John's opinions concerning my client. It's clear that for whatever reason, they had an axe to grind. What I do want you to know, ladies and gentlemen of the impartial jury, is, as the old radio show host, Paul Harvey, used to say, "the rest of the story."

So listen closely as I appeal to evidence that pre-dates what we find in Luke and John, namely, the accounts we find in Matthew and Mark, both of which were written earlier, that is, closer to the time of Jesus.

Matthew and Mark never describe Judas as a thief or a traitor. Interesting, isn't it? Instead, they indicate that he "handed over Jesus". Yes, you heard me correctly. The Greek word in question here is *perodidenai* which I argue, is mistranslated as *betrayal*. Why? Because Paul in Romans 8 uses the *same word* to indicate that God handed over Jesus. Surely, God would not "betray" Jesus! Why should we assume, then, that Judas betrayed Jesus when the Gospels here use the same word as Paul? That's crucial to my argument: the word *perodidenai* is often mistranslated as "betrayal" and simply means more neutrally, "handing someone over."

If then, Judas "handed over Jesus" to the authorities, according to Mark and Matthew, we have to ask ourselves this single question: Why? What was his motive? What was Judas's intent? Remember that neither Gospel speaks of Judas as a thief or a traitor. Those terms appear in the *later* Gospels, John and Luke.

Here is where things get fascinating. Another member of my legal team puts it as follows: Judas, our client, was a patriotic revolutionary, who, like the other disciples, longed for a free and just society, a society where peace was the standard, because God reigned. He became a follower of Jesus because he saw in Jesus a leader, the Messiah he and his fellow Judeans had been longing for. A Messiah who would lead them in a struggle that would realize the very kingdom of God.

But, like many people who profess to follow Jesus in our day, Judas mistakenly believed that Jesus as Messiah would bring about this new era of justice and peace through violence and war. And so, by handing Jesus over to the authorities, he set up a confrontation that he – that is Judas – believed, backed by God, Jesus would win, only to continue on and defeat the rest of Israel's oppressors all the way up to Imperial Rome itself!

This view, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that Judas was not malicious in turning Jesus over, but simply *mistaken*, explains why, unlike Luke, Matthew tells us Judas took his own life. He committed suicide.

Having seen that Jesus wasn't the Messiah he thought he would be, the kind who would destroy the authorities once Judas handed him over to them – he realized his mistake and took his own life. He killed himself out of remorse.

You see, members of the jury, it all comes down to motive. John and Luke see it as malicious, which explains why they use terms like thief and traitor to describe Judas. Matthew and Mark on the other hand, suggest Judas was simply

mistaken. He thought that by turning over the Messiah to the local leaders, the Messiah would destroy them, which was a commonly held belief among our client's contemporaries.

When he saw he made a catastrophic error of judgment, he felt such great remorse, that he could no longer go on living – and there, it would seem, the story ends.

Of course, this is not where the story ends. The presentation of Judas in Matthew and Mark shows us not that Satan inspired Judas to hand Jesus over as part of some larger divine plan. It does, however, show us how God could use what happened to bring about something good, namely, the promise of new life for us, all of us, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But why, you might be asking, does this matter? Well, consider the following:

For centuries, Christians have been using Judas, the one who would betray Jesus for a few silver coins, to stereotype the Jewish people as a whole. Imagine how we might undercut this kind of anti-Semitism by sticking with Matthew and Mark, who suggest that Judas was simply mistaken about who Jesus was, and turned him over accordingly. Malice never entered the picture.

Members of the jury, I have made my case in defense of my client, Judas Iscariot, a man who misunderstood his Messiah's identity and paid for it by taking his own life out of remorse for the error he made.

Now the choice is yours. Is he guilty of murder, or not guilty of murder? You decide:

"Guilty." (I had to go against 2000 years of tradition, so that's fine.)

"Not guilty."

"Abstentions."

Okay. For those who listen to this online: The majority of the congregation has abstained, which I appreciate. I was asked after last service what I thought, and really, so to speak, I think the jury's out. I think that there is a different way of presenting Judas in the gospels of Matthew and Mark than we see in Luke and John. The problem is, we tend to read the Judas story first through Luke and John, instead of starting with Mark and Matthew.

So, if I have convinced you, great; if I have not, no problem; if you are somewhere in between, that's good, too. My hope today is that you heard a compelling case for why Judas would have been simply mistaken, rather than malicious in his intent.

Amen.

