

---

---

## Reconsidering Judas

John 13: 21-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel April 1, 2015 by Christy Lohr Sapp

---

---

When I find myself with time to read fiction, which admittedly doesn't happen as often as I would like it to, I am always excited when I stumble on an author who is new to me whom I love. And then, I want to read everything this person has ever written. This happened after I read my first Gregory Maguire book.

Maguire is a novelist who practices storytelling from the margins. He takes famous stories and recasts them from the perspective of the antagonist. He imagines the enemy sympathetically and designs an alternative scenario that reveals mainstream misperception in the way a story is traditionally told. Maguire's most famous example of this was his novel "Wicked" in which the Wizard of Oz is retold from the wicked witch's perspective. It is a really creative and engaging exercise to imagine the conversations and characters in a story about whom centuries of assumptions have been made. What conjecture does cultural conditioning create around the supporting actors? Who is merely misunderstood? What stories are the product of good media supporting one side over the other?

These are the questions I find myself asking in the midst of today's reading from John. I wonder about Judas. He does not have many lines of dialogue in this gospel, but for centuries of theological and literary commentary, he has been branded the bad guy. He is the one of all of the disciples who we are taught carries a history of crushing shame. His life is ruined. His name becomes sullied. Nobody wants to associate with a Judas, nobody wants to *be* a Judas. People rarely name children after him. US census data reveals that 14 American boys born in 2013 were named "Judas" compared to 208 "Peter"s and 229 "Simon"s. Dante reserves a special level of hell for Judas – the lowest, ninth level. This level is also associated with treachery. Cain is down there, too. It is easy to hate on Judas because he quite literally sells Jesus out to the authorities for a few pieces of silver and what happens after is history: Judas becomes the quintessential traitor. But can we really blame it all on Judas?

As we will hear again in the days ahead, Judas is not the only one who betrays Jesus. If betrayal is disappointment in the commitment of friends, Judas is not alone. If betrayal is falling short of expectations, then Judas is not alone. If betrayal is denying a relationship to Jesus, then Judas is not alone. In the end, so many of the disciples betray Jesus. One does it with a kiss. Another does it by falling asleep. A third pretends not to know him. At every turn in the story from here until Easter morning, Jesus encounters betrayal and derision, and all of the disciples, religious leaders and Roman occupiers are complicit in Jesus' death.

And, it would be hubris to believe that the betrayal and denial are the methods only of those in the first century. Are we any more trustworthy or reliable than the disciples? Are we any less resentful of those who challenge our authority? Are we any more willing to divest ourselves of power and privilege? Do we understand any better the teachings of Jesus? ...

In the verses that immediately follow today's reading, Jesus gives the disciples a charge through the great commandment. He says: *"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. ... Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* He foretells his departure and directs his disciples to live in love. Note that he does not say, "I am about to die and you should avenge me." He does not say, "Seek retribution for the wrongs committed." Rather, he says, "Love one another." How do we show this love? How do we demonstrate discipleship? Can we look to Judas for an example?

Stephen Adley Guirgis's 2005 play, "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot" suggests that the most difficult person for Judas to love is himself. I wonder if this is the same for us. The show imagines a trial for Judas who is dwelling in Purgatory and is crippled by grief and despair over what he did and how he is perceived. The attorneys bring in a series of witnesses – among them saints and sinners – to address the issue of whether Judas should receive forgiveness. In one scene the defense attorney puts Satan on the stand saying, "Mister Satan — does God love Judas Iscariot? Yes or No?!" Satan responds, "God loves everybody." The attorney counters, "And yet Judas is in Hell — so what use is God's Love to Judas if my client is allowed to languish in Damnation?" To which Satan responds, "Your client is free to leave whenever he wants to — in fact, I wish he would — I could use the room." The suggestion that hell is a place of our own making is nothing new. C.S. Lewis famously claimed that the doors to hell lock only from the inside – thus leaving everyone in it free to exit.

But why would anyone choose alienation over reunion? Who would pick distance over relationship? Perhaps someone who believes himself to be unlovable? Perhaps someone who feels herself to be unworthy?

Later on in the play, Jesus comes to Judas and speaks of his love for him. Judas cannot hear it and he says to Jesus, "All I know is that you broke me unfixable ... and that now I'm here." Jesus responds, "What if I were to tell you that you are not here? That you are with me in my Kingdom even now, and that you have been there since the morning of my Ascension and that you have never left?" Incapable of accepting Jesus' forgiveness or seeing the reality of reconciliation, unable to find himself worthy of love, Judas hunkers down in his hell and drops into an unresponsive, catatonic state. How do we, too, close our ears to words of God's love? How does this keep us from living into the great commandment to share that love with others?

In creation, God proclaims his love for the world, but Satan enters the story in the guise of a snake and undermines that love with deception. In the history of Israel's freedom, God proclaims his love for the world by leading his chosen people out of slavery and through the wilderness, and the people betray that love with a golden calf and fickleness. In the Incarnation, God proclaims his love for the world through his only Son and the world answers that love with the crucifixion. Time and time again, humanity greets God's love with rejection, deception and alienation. And, time and time again God returns humiliation, shame and defeat with greater love – all that we may not grow weary or lose heart.

Perhaps this is the other story of Judas – one that sees his betrayal not in the handing over of Jesus to the authorities but in the refusal to regard himself as worthy of

redemption. Perhaps Judas' sin is an inability to see God's image in himself. Perhaps Judas' fatal and tragic flaw is in thinking that anything could separate him from the love of God or in forgetting that God can cause all things to work together for good.

God gives us a final commandment on this final night with his disciples. That commandment is love –love for each other and love for ourselves. The road to Calvary is paved with this love. Will we be able to walk it?