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Abington Presbyterian Church

March 12, 2023

Third Sunday in Lent

Psalm 78:1-4

Matthew 26:47-56

GRACE AT THE CRUX – RESISTANCE

Did he become a traitor because of all the injustice he suffered, real and imagined, as the Continental Congress did not grant him increases in salary that normally would have gone with his rank because of a whiff of monetary scandal? Was his betrayal because of bitterness over the constant agony of two battlefield wounds in an already gout-ridden leg? Perhaps there were psychological wounds received in his Connecticut childhood when his alcoholic father squandered the family's fortunes. Or was it a kind of extreme midlife crisis, swerving from radical political beliefs to reactionary ones, while serving as military commander of Philadelphia, that he met and then married Peggy Shippen, a young woman loyal to British instead of American rule for the colonies? Many of you know I am talking about Major General Benedict Arnold, a hero early in the Revolutionary War, who was discovered in a scheme to surrender the American fort at West Point, and thus became the most infamous traitor in American history.¹ There were many who thought the best way forward for the colonies included loyalty to the British crown. But Benedict Arnold's treacherous methodology is what has earned him a place of infamy in American history.

We heard a part of the story of Judas Iscariot in our reading today. There have been a variety of theories about why, as one of Jesus' twelve disciples, he chose to betray Jesus, turning him over to those who wanted him killed. Some think Judas was a Zealot, committed to the violent overthrow of the Roman occupiers of the land. Perhaps Judas hoped that when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday surrounded by followers who spoke of Jesus as a descendant of Israel's greatest king, David, that a revolution against Rome would begin. But soon Judas saw that Jesus was not interested in leading the kind of revolution for which he had hoped. He then joined forces with those who were resisting Jesus, secretly going to the chief priests who were exasperated with the uncredentialed rabbi who was drawing big crowds around town. Judas asked what they would give him if he were to

betray Jesus to them. They gave him thirty pieces of silver, not a huge amount of money – it was the price of a slave at that time.² Judas thought he was just selling information when in fact his soul got wrapped up as part of the package deal.

Was Judas trying to force Jesus' hand, getting him to be the kind of Messiah he desperately wanted him to be? Some have made that case. After making the deal to betray Jesus, Judas looked for a time when he could turn Jesus over to the established religious leaders. He knew Jesus would be in a secluded place, going to the olive grove called Gethsemane to pray after observing the Passover meal with his disciples. And with the irony of all ironies, he told the arresting party operating in the dark that he would indicate the one who they were to arrest by kissing him. "Greetings, Rabbi," he says to Jesus as he betrays him with a sign of affection and a title of devotion. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Judas is called the 'son of perdition.' In the original Greek, the title can also be translated 'lost son.' He lost his way when he tried to manipulate and compel Jesus to pursue his will instead of God's will.

Does Judas' story hit anywhere close to home? Some years ago, a congregation built a small and secluded chapel for prayer and meditation, and they equipped it with twelve chairs, each inscribed with the name of one of the disciples. The chair marked 'Judas' is the one most heavily worn with use.³ We learn from later events that Judas did not want Jesus to be killed – he just wanted Jesus to be the kind of Messiah he wanted him to be instead of the kind that God wanted him to be.

Jesus had been praying that there might be another way to follow God's will without being turned over to enemies and having to die. But he understood that would fall short of the fullest expression of God's love, and he wasn't willing to do that. As he is being arrested, one of Jesus' disciples took a sword and struck a slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Jesus seems to be even more upset with this act to defend him than he was with the act to betray him. It actually was not an act of valor, but another instance of grievous misunderstanding. In Gethsemane, the disciples had slept while Jesus was praying when they should have been alert, and now at least one of them is violently aggressive when his Lord had guided his followers to love their enemies and to be peacemakers. Jesus tells the sword

wielder to put it away, that if he wanted to, he could call down twelve legions or 72 thousand angels if he wanted to wipe out the opposition. But the destructive ways of violence were not in keeping with God's way and will. Having already fled from the ways of Jesus, those who had tried to be his disciples then flee from him as well, when their fears about the cost of staying with him overtake them.

One disciple with evil intent uses what is generally a loving gesture, and the other disciple with good motives resorts to brutal violence. For Judas and for all of the disciples, their vision of what was to be and how to get there was not in keeping with Jesus' vision and methodology. They were chasing after their whims and running away from their fears instead of following their Lord. Christianity is more than just a set of beliefs about God – it entails adopting Godly ways to relate to one another, whether those others are people on our side or not. As followers of Christ, we are called to resist the ways of treachery or violence to work our will instead of God's. Such ways are destructive. Such ways do not show God's loving nature and methodology. Both the ends and the means are important for faithfully following Jesus Christ.

This part of Jesus' story speaks of the need for us to resist our strong urges to force our own desired outcome to a conflict. We resist such greedy and fearful compulsions by seeking what Godly love would have us do. That is what Jesus lived and died for in order to be a model for us. Where do our loyalties lie – with God's vision for this world or with our own? What methodologies do we use – ways that compel and coerce or ways that are invitational and caring?

This part of the gospel narrative is a sad and difficult one. We do well to occasionally sit in Judas' chair to consider how our hearts can lean toward treachery to surrender the fort and betray our Lord. All of the disciples later regretted what they did on that night. We can learn from their example, so we don't just kiss up to Jesus, but actually seek to be dutiful students of this rabbi's teaching, following his goals and his methods, so we don't lose our identity as loving followers of Jesus Christ in the process. There is a reason this part of the story is shared in all four of the gospel narratives. How we respond to this bad news part of the story can lead us to a greater good news God has for us and for others. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ W. D. Wetherell, 'On the Trail of Benedict Arnold,' American Heritage, April/May 2007

² Exodus 21:32

³ As mentioned in Thomas G. Long's Westminster Bible Companion resource on Matthew, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997.