

April 14, 2022 – John 13:21-30 (Maundy Thursday)

Travel to the village of Victory, NY sometime and you'll find a towering stone obelisk, sitting on a bluff looking over the Hudson River. It's the Saratoga Battle Monument and it commemorates the battle that most historians refer to as the turning point of the American Revolution.

The monument has four alcoves on its four sides. Three of them contain statues of commanders from the Battle of Saratoga: General Horatio Gates, General Philip Schuyler, and Colonel Daniel Morris. But the fourth alcove is conspicuously empty. Does anybody know the fourth American commander in the Battle of Saratoga?

Major General Benedict Arnold. You see, before Benedict Arnold plotted with the British to surrender West Point, before that treason was discovered and he defected to the British army, Benedict Arnold was actually a war hero. A brilliant military strategist who was among Washington's most trusted commanders. But almost immediately after his treachery was uncovered, he became one of the most hated men in America. A man who doesn't even get a statue or plaque at the site of his greatest victory.

The parallels between Benedict Arnold and Judas Iscariot are obvious. In fact, Benjamin Franklin once said, "Judas sold only one man, Arnold sold three million." Well, Benjamin Franklin was many things, but a theologian he was not. Nevertheless, he's right about one thing. Judas' name has become so connected with betrayal that even people who know nothing about Jesus' death and resurrection at all still recognize being called a "Judas" as an insult.

Unlike Benedict Arnold, we don't know much about Judas' background, but what we do know doesn't raise any red flags. In fact, quite the opposite. The name "Iscariot" is simply a way of saying "from the town of Kerioth." Kerioth was a town in Judea, south of Jerusalem. Which means that Judas was the only one of the disciples from Judea and not Galilee.

That should have been an advantage. Galileans were considered country-bumpkins from an area that had once been populated by Samaritans. They were surrounded on every side by pagans and heretics. Whereas Judeans were pure-blooded Jews from the heart of ancient Israel. With access to all the best rabbi's and close enough to Jerusalem that they could worship at the Temple for every feast and celebration.

So there were no warning signs in Judas' upbringing. At least none that we're told about. Likewise, Judas wasn't treated differently by Jesus than any of the other disciples. He's not just a tagalong. He's not one of the 72. He's one of the twelve. One of the core disciples in Jesus' ministry. One of the men being trained to be an apostle.

Which means he saw and heard everything about Jesus' ministry from the very beginning. He watched Jesus heal the sick and injured. He saw Jesus cast out demons. He was in the boat when Jesus walked on water and when he calmed the storm. He passed out a meager handful of fish and bread to over 5,000 people. He was there when Jesus raised the dead, not once, not twice, but three times.

And he had heard everything Jesus said. He heard the judgment of God on his people. He heard the grace of God for all who believe. He heard Jesus tell people, "I forgive you." It was to him that Jesus declared that he would soon lay down his life as a ransom for many. It was to him that Jesus gave bread and wine and proclaimed that it was his very body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Judas was there. For all of it. There was no reason for him to doubt. There was no reason for him to fall away. There was no reason for him to betray Jesus... except his own sinful heart.

As I mentioned back at the beginning of Lent, it was greed that was his particular stumbling block. Judas was a thief. John 12 tells us that Judas was entrusted with the bag that contained all the money the disciples collected to then distribute to the poor. And that he would regularly help himself to its contents. John makes reference to this fact again in our reading tonight.

So it's really no surprise that when the chief priests and pharisees put a sizable bounty on Jesus' head, Judas would jump at the opportunity to make himself some money. And it was not a small sum of money. We don't know the exact coins used, and converting ancient currencies is always tricky, but the best estimates put 30 silver coins in the neighborhood of \$15,000.

So, simply put, Judas was blinded by greed. When he looked at Jesus all he saw were dollar signs. All he saw throughout Jesus' ministry was an opportunity to steal from a bunch of gullible, Galilean fishermen. All he saw in Jesus' betrayal was enough money to buy an entire farm outside of Jerusalem. To be one of those landowners that Jesus always used as a symbol for God in his parables.

He didn't see the power of God in Jesus' miracles. He didn't see the grace of God in Jesus' sermons. He didn't see the providence of God in Jesus' compassion. All he saw was his greed.

And it's easy to condemn Judas for that greed and betrayal. To a certain degree, it's right to condemn him for that greed and betrayal. Jesus himself says it would have been better for Judas that he not be born. That's pretty harsh.

But we also need to be careful. The air can get pretty thin on the moral high-ground. Notice what Jesus says when he prophecies his betrayal. Or what he doesn't say. He doesn't tell them who it is. Judas, of course, knows what he's done and plays along. But the other disciples have no idea.

And they begin to panic. To whisper to each other. To question their own devotion. Until finally Peter leans over to John, sitting next to Jesus, and begs him, "Please ask him who it is! Is it me? Am I going to betray him? I can't stand not knowing!"

Jesus says that one of them will betray him. And, in that moment, every single disciple realizes that he could be the betrayer. That they are all capable of that kind of sin. And that every one of them could be tempted to betray their Lord, just like Judas did.

Judas was a sinner. But so were each of those disciples. And so are each one of us. And we are lying to ourselves if we claim that there isn't some temptation that could manipulate us into the same level of betrayal. Whether it's greed like Judas. Or lust. Or pride. Or hatred. Or just plain fear. We are not so strong as we think we are.

So if Judas was no different than any of us, does that mean Judas was saved in the end? No. No, Judas does have one difference with us. When Judas finally came to his senses. When he realized what he had done. How he had just condemned his rabbi and Lord to death for money. Judas goes and he hangs himself.

He doesn't think back to all those sermons of Jesus, declaring God's grace to sinners. He doesn't remember all those prostitutes and tax collectors and Samaritans whom Jesus welcomed into the kingdom of God. Had he even gone to Jesus' crucifixion, he would have heard a thief just like him confess his sins and receive the promise of paradise.

But no. Judas abandoned all hope of God's grace. He thought that he was beyond redemption. And he killed himself in despair. Without hope and, most of all, without faith. And for that, Jesus calls him in John 17 the "son of destruction". The only one of Jesus' disciple whom he lost completely.

And so that is the difference between Judas and us. We're no different in our sinfulness. We're no different in our betrayal. We're just different in how we see Jesus.

Judas saw someone who couldn't possibly forgive him for what he had done. But we see the Son of God, sent to lay down his life as a ransom for me. We see the Savior, who always forgives. No matter the sin. No matter the betrayal. From whose love nothing can separate us.

And we get to be reminded of that on a regular basis. We get to be reminded of that this very night: "*On the night when Jesus was betrayed, he took bread...*"

On the night that he was betrayed. On the night Judas betrayed him. On the night his disciples betrayed him. On the night we betrayed him by our sin. Jesus took bread. And said, "This is my body for the forgiveness of your sins." Jesus took the cup. And said, "This is my blood for the forgiveness of your sins." On the night when Jesus was betrayed, he was already giving us the means by which every one of our betrayals would be forgiven.

The moment that Benedict Arnold betrayed his country, his name was erased from history as anything but a betrayer. A traitor to his country. The moment that Judas sinned, his name was erased from history as anything but a betrayer. A traitor to his Lord.

But the moment that you sin, your name is not erased. You are not labeled a betrayer. Because your name is already written in the Lamb's book of life. You are labeled of a child of the most high God. Your sins are washed away and you are covered in Christ's righteousness.

You are not a betrayer. You are not a traitor. You are a disciple. And to you, Christ gives His Body and His Blood and says, "Take and eat. Take and drink. This is for you." Amen.