

West Branch Friends Meeting
April 9, 2017
Sue McCracken, Pastor

Scripture: I Corinthians 13: 4-13

Paul's words in Corinthians resonate with me, especially putting away childish things and only seeing spiritual things dimly while living our lives here on earth. For me, I think about the things I believed as a child...that the earth was created in seven days – the days like we know days today the 24 hour variety. That the earth stopped rotating (or from Joshua's perspective, the sun stood still) so Joshua could win a battle. Or that Daniel could sit with lions and they were like house cats. I believe I see these things more clearly as an older adult....for myself, I have learned to take the Bible seriously, but not literally, understanding that the authors were recording their experiences of God in the terms of their understandings of the time – well before any of our modern scientific knowledge.

So how do we these see the final days in the life of Jesus – the end of the Lenten season – seriously but not necessarily literally? Because most of us have pictures in our minds of the week preceding Easter from years of sitting in Sunday School and Church. Pictures of Jesus riding on a donkey, palm branches being waved, the confrontation in the garden with Judas' betrayal and Jesus horrific death by crucifixion. We have often taken the words in the gospels literally - as the beginning-and end-of the story. But I would like to take another look at that week, a look back that includes a lot of historical information about life in Jerusalem the week leading up to Jesus' death.

And I must warn you – I'm going to propose some things this morning that you may totally disagree with. And I'm OK with that. All I ask is to just give it a little careful consideration, keeping in mind there were no eye witnesses who went home and wrote down the events that they saw, because the stories in the gospels were not written by anyone who was there; they were written decades – 60-90 years - after the events took place.

Benjamin Corey is a speaker and blogger who digs into the historical pieces of the life and times of Jesus and the disciples, and I want to share some of his work, especially thinking a little about Judas “the bad guy.”

Try and picture Jesus and the disciples during that time, living under a violent military occupation of their country. Imagine if you will, living in an America and having a foreign country functionally capture us, dethrone our government, and rule over us by force and violence– even nailing hundreds of people to trees along the highways as a constant reminder to keep our heads down and mouths shut. ***That’s*** the context in which the story of Jesus takes place. Just as today we often hear the question asked, “What do we do about ISIS?”, so in Jesus’ time the question was “What do we do about the Romans?”

People disagreed on how to best deal with the fact that their entire country, Israel, was basically being held hostage. Some people, like the chief priests and tax collectors, cozied up to the powerful, the Romans, in order to make life more bearable. Some, like Jesus, taught people to engage in a subversive love - a type of nonviolent resistance. Remember his ideas? Love your enemies...if someone takes your coat, give him your shirt, too...and, if someone smacks you on your right cheek, just turn and offer the other cheek. These ideas are not exactly violent responses when the Romans are holding you captive. But others – like Judas – wanted a leader who would lead them to defeat Rome, and win freedom for their people by any means, even violence if necessary. All three positions - cozying up to the Romans, nonviolent resistance, and violent government overthrow - at least make intellectual sense, and I can understand why someone would adopt any of the three.

When we step away from viewing Judas as a mole planted in the tribe of Jesus, when we resist viewing him as one who plotted to get Jesus killed, we might just be able to see a different person. I have to ask myself the question: has Judas been literally demonized? And can we re-humanize him in the context of the history of the time?

When I see Judas through empathetic eyes I see someone who loved his country. I'm sure he loved his people, the Jews. I imagine he was filled with a righteous anger at the injustice of being occupied by ruthless Romans, and was sick and tired of walking down dusty roads and seeing his fellow Israelites dead and hanging from trees. In Judas, I see someone who desperately believed that God was about to save them from their suffering through Jesus, the Savior, just as God had promised in the Old Testament scriptures. And I can imagine that day-by-day, Judas grew more and more determined to do something about it. A question that begs to be answered for me is this: would Judas have spent so much time following Jesus and learning from him if he did not love him deeply and believe in him?

But here's where things went wrong: what if Judas thought that ultimately, under the right conditions, Jesus would lead them to a violent resistance and overthrow the Roman occupation? In fact, I have to consider that maybe Judas had actually placed all of his faith and trust in Jesus— particularly that Jesus was the awaited one who would free them. Remember...it was the Old Testament scriptures that were read in the synagogue....scriptures that spoke of a Savior, a Redeemer who would save the Jews from their oppressors.

These are familiar prophecies found in the 9th chapter of Isaiah:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

When Jesus failed to emerge as a warrior Messiah, I have to consider that Judas tried to intervene to make it happen. Maybe he thought Jesus was just waiting for the right time...but it wasn't looking good...Jesus wasn't acting like a revolutionary Savior would act.

Judas got tired. Impatient. His anger against the injustice at the hands of the Romans grew by the day. He wanted to help Jesus fulfill the destiny he believed Jesus was sent to do, but totally misunderstood what that destiny was. And so, it isn't hard for me to consider Judas deciding to take matters into his own hands, arranging the meeting he thought would be the beginning of a revolution that would lead to their freedom. Except, the whole thing backfired. Badly. When the disciples tried to violently resist, Jesus actually rebuked them and willingly went to his death– not at all how Judas, Peter, and I'm sure other disciples, too, thought the whole thing would go down.

I struggle to believe Judas intended to harm Jesus or get him killed– what I am considering, instead, is that Judas was trying to 'invite' Jesus to take a stand against Rome, and all those who were colluding with the enemy. I also have a hard time believing it was ever about greed or money– Judas returned the money when it was over, and would he have followed a homeless rabbi for three years had greed and money been high priorities for him? Instead, I have to try and see more clearly this Judas - a guy who believed in his friend, who placed all of his hopes in him, and the dreams for the future of his Jewish people in him.

What if Judas wasn't intending to betray Jesus at all, but merely just wanted to move the story along in the direction he thought it was supposed to go? And when the plan failed, when he accidentally got his friend and mentor killed, he was overwhelmed with grief. So overwhelmed, that he took his own life.

I grew up seeing Judas as the evil one– the one who sat quietly in wait until he could find a way to have Jesus killed. But now, I don't see it that way. When we invite our eyes to see more clearly, and with empathy, I think we can get a different picture of Judas – someone who actually thought he was doing the right thing, but who in doing so, actually harmed someone he loved deeply.

I also think it's easy to demonize people even today, and to write them off as the "bad guys." That may be exactly what has happened to Judas for the last 2,000 years, and I think that's unfortunate – because I'm really not sure Judas was one of the bad guys. In fact, I think maybe Judas may have been a lot like you and me. We get impatient. We think we know what God should do in a given situation. We hatch plans that, in the moment, we think are good and wise and for the best. And sometimes, those plans don't turn out the way we had hoped, people we love get unintentionally hurt in the process, and we find ourselves filled with grief and remorse. In this way, Judas is not some distant, evil character... he's becomes just a guy like you and me; someone who unintentionally hurt one of the people he loved most.

I also grew up having been told the Jews were the bad ones in this week's story leading up to Easter – the ones who caused Jesus' death. And, sadly, I was not alone. This negative sentiment, for many, spilled over into disdain for ALL Jewish people in ALL times and places. History is full of disturbing accounts of anti-Semitic prejudice, torture, terrorism, imprisonment, and the outright killing of Jewish people during the Inquisitions and the Nazi Holocaust. And with the recent destruction of Jewish cemeteries and the death threats to Jewish schools and daycares, we still have a ways to go when it comes to judging religious groups.

History can be a tough teacher for all of us. The Protestant Reformation has had its dark side; every church denomination has manifested the full range of human failings. But when we can quit looking at the specks in others' eyes and focus on the boulders in our own, THEN we can begin to see things more clearly.

I might also suggest that perhaps Jesus horrific death on a cross was a part of Roman history; that those in power in the Roman Empire began to see this radical man with huge followings as a threat – someone who had to be eliminated rather than risk losing the control held by Rome. What if we can focus on the life of Jesus and how he shows us the way to live in order to be all we can be with God infused in our lives?

If we take Pauls' words in I Corinthians 13 seriously – if love – and we know God is love – always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres and never fails, then, for me, I see this death not as something a loving God required of Jesus, but an act of history. That's the God of love that I want to emulate.

Let's quit picking at each other, looking for the 'bad guy Judas' in every situation. Instead, let's keep our eyes focused on the example Jesus' life showed us of how to live when God is a part of our every decision, our every action, our every single day. Let's see history more clearly; let's let love win.

Let's make our daily living about love, not judgment.