

“Names”
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; John 17:6-19

Perhaps no one in history has been as reviled and despised as Judas Iscariot. He betrayed the location of Jesus to the authorities, and they arrested, tortured, and killed him. It’s hard to know why Judas did it, and despite our curiosity, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is that Judas turned on his friend, his teacher, his Lord, and for that history has remembered him, for history is of this world, and Judas chose to belong to the world, instead of to Jesus.

There’s a little bit of Judas in all of us. Nobody wants hear or admit to that. It’s a terrible thing to consider. But the temptation to sell Jesus out assails each of us, and from time to time, we name our price, and give him up to the forces that seek to destroy both him and us. Of course, none of us can betray Jesus in precisely the way Judas did, but there are moments when other things seem more important, and when we pursue those goals and go against Jesus, the little Judas inside us takes over. When we harbor resentments and dream of vengeance, Judas takes control. When we think we’re entitled or superior, that’s the little Judas inside, hard at work.

While no one may be as notorious as Judas Iscariot, few in history have shown such great promise yet been as forgotten as Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas Justus. These two were finalists for replacing Judas Iscariot as the twelfth disciple. They were chosen by 120 of the faithful, based on exacting criteria, but in the end, their fate was decided not on their merits. Rather they cast lots, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal who was to be chosen, and the privilege and responsibility of being the twelfth Apostle fell on Matthias.

He must have been excited and terrified in equal measure. Maybe he dreamed of doing great things in the service of Jesus, and maybe he did great things. We simply have no idea. Once he was selected, the New Testament never mentions Matthias again. He faded into the mist of history, and we can only guess what he did and how he died.

The same was true of Joseph Barsabbas Justus. Just imagine how disappointed he felt. So close to being exalted as one of the Twelve, to being promoted, yet he stayed an ordinary disciple, one among hundreds. Like Matthias, none of the many names by which this man was known ever again appeared in the New Testament. We hope that he recovered from his disappointment and went on to do amazing things for the sake of the gospel, but we'll never know.

There is a little bit of Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas Justus in each of us. In our lives there have been instances of exaltation coupled with fear and episodes where we can so close to what we wanted, but fell short, often for arbitrary reasons beyond our control. And much as we might like to leave a lasting legacy, to find a measure of immortality, our names will most likely be forgotten, swept away by the sands of time.

We want our name to endure, our accomplishments to be remembered, our contributions honored long after we are gone. But the truth is that, like Matthias and Joseph, very few if any of us will be known two-hundred years from now, much less two-thousand. It is humbling, even disturbing, and that is why we need to embrace the everlasting life promised to us by Jesus, because we do not belong to this world, a world fascinated by celebrity and that fabled 15 minutes of fame. Instead, we belong to God, and our perpetual endurance lies not in the whims of memory and history, but in the promise that our names are known by a God who never forgets.

As Jesus prepared for the final, decisive days of his life here on Earth, he prayed to God his Father. Jesus prayed for himself, as we might expect from someone about to suffer such agony, but mostly he prayed for his disciples, that they might be united, not by some common cause or the fickle bonds of affection, but by a Spirit that would protect them from the dangers and temptations of this world. And that prayer was offered by Jesus not just for those few who were with him then, but for all people throughout the ages who hope for eternity.

Every time we fall prey to the temptation of belonging to this world, we deny Jesus and betray him, as Judas did. Every time ambition and conceit become the primary motivation in life, we abandon our faith. Every time we feel disappointment about the fragility of our legacy, we forget that we are not meant to belong to this world. We belong to God, the sole source for what we most desire: not to be erased; not to disappear into the maw of oblivion.

And Jesus has provided us with what we need, what we yearn to receive. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, he offers us a name not our own, a holy name that owns us, a name to whom we belong. This is the name we ought to cling to, instead of our own or any other. This is the name that grants us an identity which will never fade, a name that embraces us without regard for our achievements or failure, but with compassionate regard for our faithfulness and obedience.

Dwelling with that holy name alleviates our anxiety about the future. It disperses the disappointment we feel at the prospect, indeed the near certainty, of being forgotten. That holy name guards us against the temptation to betray Jesus as Judas Iscariot did by putting our own desires and opinions above Jesus.

What grace, that in the midst of this world in which we live, but to which we do not belong, there might arise an unforgettable name that gives us the mercy to truly belong.

Everyone wants to feel like they belong. Everyone wants their name to be remembered and cherished. But the world will not give us this. Only God, motivated purely by love, gives us the joy of belonging, of being known and remembered and treasured forever. This the reality of eternal life, and every day we need to seek the grace that protects us from temptation and guides us along the pathway of faithful discipleship that leads to what we want and need most.

And to seek this grace, to receive the Holy Spirit, to be bound together in love with one another and with Jesus, we need to do as Jesus did and pray. That's what he did in the crucial hour. Jesus prayed, and our prayers draw us closer to him, closer to that sense of belonging we crave, closer to the never-ending day where we abide with God in the Kingdom that has no end.

This frees us from the grasp of a world that takes much more than it ever gives. Perfect freedom means, ironically, to submit all of who we are to the One who made us, to the One who helps us become the people we are intended to be, to the One who holds together in the midst of worldly forces that threatened to tear us apart and tear us down.

So I encourage you to pray. Pray like your life depends on it, because our life does depend on it. Pray that your heart may be opened to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit, so that your sense of belonging will bring you joy and peace, even as you pass every day in a world where belonging often means exploitation. And rejoice always in the precious gift of that Name above all names, a Name that knows and loves us and rescues us from nothingness and grants us a realm where we can abide and never die or be forgotten. Amen.