

THE JUDAS CHROMOSOME

JOHN 13:1-17; 31b-35

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Holy Week is a good time to ponder the forces of darkness in our world.

There is a tradition in the church that excoriates humans. Jonathan Edwards likened us to spiders dangling over the pit of hell. Such images have nothing to do with Scripture. The Bible begins by celebrating the goodness of human life.

Rather, Jesus' arrest, trial and execution was orchestrated by people representing the finest religion of their time – Judaism; in consort with the best political system of the day – the Roman Empire.

The question of Maundy Thursday is how does it happen that humans – their systems and communities – manage to destroy relationships, wreak havoc and bring about injustice.

We are not going to solve the problem of evil in a ten minute meditation.

But that poignant moment when Judas departs from the table, shows how evil emanates from well-intentioned people when they justify their own agendas and pull away from the struggle of human community.

What I am saying is Judas was not just a disgruntled, ambitious disciple, who leaves the dinner party to do his teacher in. What I'm saying is there is a little of Judas in each of us.

Judas cloaked his deed in concern for the poor and oppressed. He betrayed Jesus because he realized Jesus was not the one he hoped would oust the Romans.

We too get up from the table of community when someone doesn't meet our expectations or do what we want. We too choose to fracture relationships rather than face the hard work of mutual understanding and forgiveness.

I am surprised at the resistance and naivete of the social sciences when it comes to evil. Most behavioral scientists do not even use the word – although that is now changing.

Some have found that the word 'evil' works to describe human behavior so violent they have no other ways to describe it. One expert even has a rating system for evil. He uses it to categorize the worst criminals.¹

But using the term to point to the most brutal behavior misses the point. Evil, says the Bible tonight, can seduce and reside in any of us.

How else do we explain the tragedy that took place in Red Lake, Minnesota, Tuesday? One resident said the boy fell between the cracks even in that small town. His father committed suicide, his mother was paralyzed from a car accident. The boy was sending signals for years about his disturbed psyche and dark intentions.

Sure they medicated him, sent him to a therapist, put him on probation.

But no one apparently looked in on him. No one asked, "how is it for you Jeff, father gone, mother living at the nursing home, no one to turn to?"

The boy committed the evil act but I suspect more than a few in that town let the label 'angry teenager' keep him from the table of their fellowship.

Hindsight is twenty/twenty. But without foresight we need some hindsight to learn from events that affect us all like that tragedy.

We are talking about the forces of darkness in our world. The problem is not the people in Red Lake. Lord knows they now have a lifetime of sorting and healing to do. The problem is the Judas chromosome in all of us.

Maybe the stumbling block isn't the label 'angry teenager.' Maybe it's insecurity. Colleague tells the story of a young minister in a small Midwest town who lives with his wife and baby in a run down box of a house the church calls a parsonage.

One Saturday there's a knock at the door. Standing there on the porch is the chairman of the church board who is also the president of the local bank. He has an old, small, black and white television missing one of its knobs.

"My wife and I got one of those new big screen color sets," he says, "they wouldn't take this on trade, so I said to myself, 'well, we'll just give it to the minister. That's probably the reason our ministers don't stay any longer than they do. We don't do enough nice things for them.'"ⁱⁱ

The Judas chromosome let that bank president think he was doing his Christian duty. Disguised to himself his own complicity building himself up while putting another down.

Or perhaps it's not insecurity. Perhaps it's prejudice – not in a member of the Ku Klux Klan but in an educated professional, someone like you or me.

The *New England Journal of Medicine* found that doctors were 40% less likely to order cardiac tests for women and blacks who complained about chest pain than for white men with identical symptoms. Medical professionals who make life and death decisions often operate, concludes the study, with unconscious bias about gender and race.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are talking about the forces of darkness in our world, in us. We are saying that each of us has a little of Judas in us. The Judas chromosome.

We could find lots more examples of how that chromosome let's us disguise our malevolence or dark fantasies in laudable causes and pious behavior.

A master teacher I heard about this week fired because of the political machinations of the head of school and chairman of the board of trustees. Or our ongoing war against terrorism – which our President says will continue for generations to come – seriously runs the danger, I fear, of fueling hatred for Middle Easterners different from us and making war at any cost the only solution to human conflict.

In fact, a recent study finds that it is the dehumanizing narratives, the stories that we inherit or invent and tell and retell to ourselves, to our communities and to our children that bolster attitudes that justify hatred.^{iv}

Such stories were told regularly in the Third Reich about Jews. Such stories are told regularly today about Christian Sudanese in Darfur by the Arab government.

I am sure Judas had a story he played over and over again in his mind about the suffering of his people, the sinister Romans and so justified his decision to turn over this man who so disappointed him.

The good news tonight is that just as Judas got up from the table to go out and betray Jesus eleven disciples remained at that table. What they heard was just as startling and disappointing for them as it was for their brother Judas.

Jesus would be taken from them, tried and executed he said. Surely Judas was not the only one who hoped Jesus would lead the revolution. I am sure Matthew or Peter or Andrew despaired at the news that Jesus would be leaving them.

He was their leader, their mentor, their teacher. They had devoted three years of their lives to him. How could he simply allow himself to be taken and tried? What would become of them? How were they to survive?

But as much as a Judas chromosome you and I also have the spiritual genes of the eleven who remained in the upper room that night.

Like them when we are frightened and worried and think ourselves in danger we can choose to stay at the table, let Jesus care for us as he did in the washing of their feet, and the giving to them of the bread of life.

In other words, when it makes no sense to trust Jesus and all the sense in the world to look out for number one, get back at the enemy or reject some class or color of people we, like the eleven, can choose to stay with Jesus.

What they found in the days ahead was not so much *their* staying by him – for indeed, they scattered to the alley ways and upper rooms of Jerusalem later that night and over the three days to come.

What they found was that through the fellowship and food of the table he stayed faithfully by them. And alongside the people of Red Lake, MN; and that bank president handing the old television to his minister; just as he is with us.

The really good news tonight is that he still is alongside those doctors who misdiagnose their patients and the patients too; and he stands by that head of the school, his board chair, and the terminated teacher as well.

What the world needs tonight is for those who gather at the holy supper,
when we feel ourselves pushing away from the table and turning our back on the
hard work of building and becoming community,
what the world needs in these times is for you and me to decide instead to
stay and let him feed us with the bread of life and nourish us with the cup
of salvation. Amen.

ⁱ Benedict Carey, "For the Worst of Us, the Diagnosis May Be Evil," *The New York Times*, Tuesday, February 8, 2005, D1.

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001) 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jack E. White, "Prejudice? Perish the Thought: the most insidious racism is among those who don't think they harbor any," *Time Magazine*, March 8, 1999, 36.

^{iv} William Speed Weed, "Why We Hate," *Yale Alumni Magazine*, September/October 2004, 43.