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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, October 18, 2023
Matthew 10:1-4, RSV
Judas Iscariot

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 10:1-4, RSV
In last week's reading, we read the good news that Jesus is a man of compassion. Now, this good Man calls his Twelve Disciples. One of them betrays him.

¹And he [Jesus] called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. ²The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zeb'edee, and John his brother; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Someday I want to preach a sermon about the disciple named Philip. Philip is the one who gave his simple but powerful testimony to his skeptical friend Nathan'a-el:

Nathan'a-el said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." (John 1:46, RSV)

To this very day, Philip's invitation is a simple and moving way to win souls for Christ: Come and see Jesus. I like Philip so much that maybe someday I will establish a mission congregation named "St. Philip Lutheran Church."

But Philip is not the one on my heart now. Judas is. We learn something about the nature of divine love in the dealings of Jesus with Judas.

Divine love is shown not in loving our friends, but in loving those who do us wrong, even loving those we know are going to do us wrong. This is the teaching of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans. It is a passage I have always loved. The Apostle says this:

⁷Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. ⁸But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:7-8, RSV)

Judas was a sinner, yet Jesus loved him and gave him every chance to turn away from the treachery Judas planned.

St. John says that Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas would betray him. We read this in John 6:

For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. (John 6:64, RSV)

We might wonder: If Jesus knew that Judas was going to betray him, why did he call Judas to be one of the Twelve? But to this question, I pose a counter-question: Would we rather that Jesus leave Judas out? Would we rather that Jesus not invite Judas to walk with him? Would we be content that Jesus should leave *any* of us out, sinners though we be and, I am sad to say, continue to be even when Jesus has called us to walk with him?

So, we need to wrestle a bit with the doctrine of predestination. Certainly the Bible does speak of predestination. There is a true sense in which from the very beginning of time, our God knew that Judas would betray Jesus. But this is my conviction about the doctrine of predestination: It must not be understood to mean that we have no freedom to obey God. We always retain that freedom — each of us. Judas too! The doctrine of predestination has a different purpose. Its legitimate purpose is to keep us from boasting about ourselves and our own merits. If we must boast, let us boast of Jesus. But the doctrine means for Judas what it means for any of us: We ought not to go around betraying Jesus! Judas was free to turn from his wicked plan, but he did not, and he bears responsibility for what he did. There is no necessity for wickedness — neither for Judas nor for us.

You might say, “But if Judas had turned away from his wicked plan, what would have become of us? What would have become of our salvation?” To which I answer using the magnificent words of St. John Chrysostom long ago: God’s wisdom is “rich in contrivance, and incomprehensible” (on Matthew 26:17 and 18). That is, if Judas had not betrayed Jesus, and if *no one on earth* had betrayed Jesus, still our Maker would have found a way to save us. Judas did betray Jesus, but he ought not to have done so, and he was free to have been true to Jesus.

I am saying, then, that in the gentle dealings of Jesus with Judas, Jesus was not pretending. He was not pretending to show love for Judas. I am thinking of the night in which Jesus was betrayed. I am thinking of that Passover Supper in which Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and bid them to follow his example of service (John 13). Peter protested that he did not want Jesus to wash his feet. I think the one who really should have protested was Judas. How could Judas sit there and quietly watch as Jesus washed his feet? How

could Judas have such a hard heart when he had already resolved to betray Jesus?

St. John says that *the devil* put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. So, this is the Passover night in which Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The words about the devil go this way:

²And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him,
³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. (John 13:2-4, RSV)

So, the devil did his dirty work with Judas. But I say, "So what!" The devil goes about his business. He will continue his awful work until Jesus completes his victory and tosses Satan right out of reality. Till then, the devil continues to put plans of betrayal and all kinds of wicked ideas into the hearts of people. So what? Let's be hard-headed about this. Judas should not have gone out into the night to betray Jesus. He should have turned down the devil, as we should turn down the devil.

Jesus warned Judas. Jesus warned him, appealed to him, without humiliating him. He let Judas know that he, Jesus, knew about the planned betrayal. That should have been enough to shut down the treachery. Jesus spoke to the man in a way that gave him opportunity to repent, while leaving the rest of the disciples uncertain what Jesus meant. The awesome scene goes this way:

²¹When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; ²⁴so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." ²⁵So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast"; or, that he should give something

to the poor. ³⁰So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night. (John 13:2, 21-30, RSV)

St. Matthew reports that even in the moment of betrayal, Jesus called Judas “friend”:

⁴⁸Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him.” ⁴⁹And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Hail, Master!” And he kissed him. ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, “Friend, why are you here?” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. (Matthew 26:48-50, RSV)

In the end, Judas did repent of his betrayal of Jesus. But by then, Judas was in despair and went out and hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). Judas was capable of repentance. I wish he had repented twice: once, before he had betrayed Jesus, and once, before he killed himself.

The story of Judas is a tragedy for that man. I have hastened to make two points: First, though the devil had put it in the heart of Judas to betray Jesus, Judas should not have done so. He was free to turn down the devil. And second, Jesus was gentle in his dealings with Judas. I have wanted to make these points because to some degree or another, we are all kin to Judas. The devil puts miserable thoughts into our hearts sometimes, and we are free to turn the devil down. And fallible disciples that we are, Jesus is kind to sinners and invites them to come, follow him with even more integrity, follow Him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.