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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, March 27, 2024
Matthew 16:13-28
Judas

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 16:13-28, RSV
Last week we read about the sign of Jonah. Also Jesus asked us to beware of false teaching. Now, we read of Peter's great confession about Jesus, the passion prediction, and our Lord's call to self-denial and to carry our cross.

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

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

Today is Holy Wednesday — the midpoint of Holy Week. The Three Holy Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil lie ahead of us, close at hand. By tradition, this day, Holy Wednesday, has another name — an intriguing name. This day is often called “Spy Wednesday.” It is a day that refers to Judas, the Betrayer of our Lord. Holy Wednesday has its own appointed Bible Lessons, and the Gospel Lesson for today is always about Judas (John 13:21-32). The tradition calls today “Spy Wednesday” because it speaks of Judas as a spy — someone in the midst of the Twelve who is not quite like the rest. At first glance, he looks like the other disciples. He might even believe about himself that he is like the other disciples. And yet there is something off-kilter about the man. He is different. It is a difference I want to try to explore in this sermon.

I am not departing from my policy of preaching on St. Matthew. I love this continual preaching on a book of the Bible. So, the passage I have just read aloud is simply the next passage in our look at the Gospel according to St. Matthew. But I mean to tilt this evening’s sermon toward Judas, toward that spy.

Let’s begin by considering Peter’s great confession concerning Jesus:

¹⁵[Jesus] said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:15-16, RSV)

Peter, the ever-fervent one, bursts forth with this answer. And it is the correct answer. It is the Spirit-inspired answer.

Now, there had been a similar confession concerning Jesus earlier in our Gospel. Back in Matthew Chapter 14, when we read of Jesus walking on the water, and Peter too for a while, when they got into the boat, the wind ceased and the disciples were amazed. The words back then go this way:

³²And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Matthew 14:32-33)

One difference between this confession in the boat and the confession in this evening’s reading is that back then, all the disciples in the boat exclaimed that Jesus is the Son of God and they worshiped him, but in this evening’s reading, it is simply Peter who confesses Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The rest of the disciples probably agree with Peter and nod their heads in agreement. But what about Judas? Does Judas agree with Peter? Or does Judas rather stare down at the ground, thinking that Peter has lost his mind?

There is something different about Peter's confession. Jesus blesses Peter for his confession, but he did not bless the disciples back in the boat, though they too had called Jesus "the Son of God." St. John Chrysostom speculated that the difference has to do with the claim of divinity. He concluded that when the disciples in the boat called Jesus "the Son of God," they meant that Jesus was one of many sons of God — like the patriarchs and the prophets. Jesus was highly favored by God. Chrysostom believed that that is what the disciples meant back in the boat. Perhaps this is the kind of praise that Judas could agree with. But in Peter's Great Confession this evening, Peter is speaking of the divinity of Jesus. He is speaking of Jesus as being of the same substance as God the Father. As evidence of this, Chrysostom refers to the way Jesus addresses Peter:

¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! (Matthew 16:17, RSV)

It is as if Jesus says, "Peter, as you are the son of Jona — you are Bar-Jona — so I am the Son of God. I am of the same substance as my Father."

One way or the other, Peter's Great Confession here in Chapter 16 is different. It is sublime. In fact, Jesus says that he will build his Church on Peter's faith.

But, again, what about Judas? In the boat, all the disciples spoke of Jesus as the Son of God. Here we hear only of Peter. Did the rest of the disciples agree with Peter? Did Judas flat-out disagree? I think we must say that Judas did disagree. How else can we explain his betrayal of our Lord? After all, one does not go around betraying *God*. That would not make sense!

I do not understand Judas. I cannot make sense of him. He worries me. Judas illustrates the dreadful possibility of walking with Jesus, but still not getting it... of being a lifelong member of the Church but still not getting it. Judas is the prime example for me of what the King James Version calls the "mystery of iniquity" (2 Thessalonians 2:7). The man walked with Jesus. He was called by Jesus. He witnessed the miracles of Jesus. He heard the divine preaching of Jesus. Yet he did not believe in Jesus — not the way Peter does in Peter's Great Confession.

So, I do not get Judas. I do not understand the man.

But I am persuaded of one thing: The unbelief of Judas is not innocent! His unbelief is something for which he is accountable. Indeed, his unbelief reverberates in eternity. So it is that we have that frightening passage from this past Sunday's Palm Sunday Passion reading — the one about never being born:

¹⁷And when it was evening he came with the twelve. ¹⁸And as they were at table eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." ¹⁹They began to be sorrowful, and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" ²⁰He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. ²¹For the Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." (Mark 14:17-21, RSV)

We need to be more serious about our religion. We need to be more serious about Jesus. It is not enough to say, "Well, I am just that kind of a person. I do not care all that much about spiritual matters." We might want to excuse ourselves that way, but we can do better than that! That would be a pretty light-weight defense of Judgment Day. And the thing is, if we do not become more serious about Jesus, we might find ourselves joining Judas in betraying our Lord. Jesus does not deserve betrayal. Rather, to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.