“Betrayal”

Matthew 26:31-75

Who are the most notorious traitors in history? It’s a long list, but we don’t need to look far beyond our own experiences to find one.

Philadelphia, July 4, 1776. The setting is Independence Hall where the Second Continental Congress is meeting. The Declaration of Independence is adopted, and in so doing, the 13 American colonies sever their political connections to Great Britain, an act that Britain considers the ultimate betrayal. To put it bluntly, it is treason.

Later, when the delegates got around to signing the Declaration, Benjamin Franklin realized the enormity of the situation. Putting aside his quill, he said to the assembly, “We must all hang together or, assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

He didn’t hang, but very soon thereafter, a 21-year-old kid did. His name was Nathan Hale, and his last words reportedly were: “I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.” He was hanged by the British in New York City as a small crowd gathered to observe near the southern end of where Central Park stands today.

What is less well-known is that some colonists were executed by Washington or other officers of the Continental Army for being traitors — David Farnsworth, for example, who was caught producing counterfeit money, creating a threat to the economy. Or Moses Dunbar, a loyalist executed for attempting to recruit for the British Army.

This litany of villains, backstabbers and betrayers could continue, but to this short list, we add Judas, Peter and Pilate, the three that are mentioned in Matthew’s gospel, the text for Passion Sunday. What can we learn from these three characters?

The Judas Betrayal: Greed

The betrayal of Judas was a deliberate, premeditated and conscious act, taken by a weasel corrupted by avarice and motivated by ambition. Of the three betrayals, it was the most personal and mean-spirited. He was the mole in the operation. His very name is forever associated with treachery and betrayal. A Judas kiss is any traitorous action disguised as a show of affection. A Judas is a treacherous, lying, thieving lowlife. A Judas tree is the name given to the alder tree from which Judas hanged himself. A Judas hole is a small opening in a door through which a person can spy without being seen from the other side, like the peepholes used in the front door of homes or hotel room doors.

Wouldn't you find it odd if your friends named their child Judas? Not many people named Judas. Jude, but not Judas.

Jesus knew, of course, there was a mole in the organization — a leak that would lead to the temporary collapse of his ministry. Jesus once said, "'Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.' He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him" (John 6:70-71).

Judas's betrayal was motivated by greed. Perhaps he had some gambling debts or was behind on the rent. He was always driven by the bottom line. Recall his reaction to Mary's use of an expensive ointment with which she bathed the feet of Jesus (John 12:3-5). He was always in on all of the Twelve's activities. Jesus did not try to exclude him. He became the treasurer, shepherding what funds the disciples shared.

The betrayal seems personal: "So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and

weapons" (John 18:3). The enemies of Jesus came at night and met the Galilean preacher with overwhelming force. And when Judas greeted him, he leaned into him, clasping the Lord by his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. So, this was personal — very personal. There was a planned, motivated certainly and chiefly by greed, but no doubt also by disappointment and disillusionment.

In any case, the betrayal was stunning in its conception and diabolical in its execution. You can't get more personal than a kiss, and it was the kiss that signaled the arrest and put plans to execute Jesus into high gear.

The Peter Betrayal: Cowardice

The second disciple to betray Jesus was someone in the inner circle. Yet while Judas committed suicide, Peter would recover, and become a passionate preacher in the formative early days of the church. It was Pentecost Peter who, more than any other disciple, brought his Jewish brothers and sisters into the church.

Peter's betrayal took place on the dark night of Jesus' interrogation before Annas the High Priest, assisted by his son-in-law, Caiaphas, also a high priest. It is unlikely that Peter had ever in his life been on the wrong side of the law, his hot-tempered nature notwithstanding. He was fine in his own natural environment out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee catching tilapia. He was a simple country boy from up north.

On the night Jesus was questioned, Peter was hanging in there, warming his hands by a small fire. He remembered what the Lord had said to him only hours earlier: "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." Peter had protested: "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you" (26:34-35).

In Peter's defense, the other disciples, to a man, said the same thing: "And so said all the disciples."

Peter had never been tried by fire. In the crucible of terrifying circumstances, Peter's courage melted like butter in a frying pan. As a cowboy, he was all hat and no cattle. He could talk a big game, but in the arena, his knees buckled. He was not at all like the disciple whose trash talk was full of arrogance fueled by pride and a flash-pan temper. No, we would never think of Peter as "the Rock" when we look at his behavior while warming himself at a fire.

His courage and bravado evaporated like the smoke. His *first denial* came following the observation of a servant girl who said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." Peter said, "I don't know what you are talking about" (26:69-70). He got up from the fire and moved out to the "porch." If smoking had been a thing, then, he might have lit up a Marlboro. There, he ran into a second servant girl who, ignoring Peter, said to the crowd, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." This time, Peter swore, adding, "I do not know the man" (26:72). This was his *second betrayal*. The *third denial* occurred after some people in the crowd came up to Peter and noted, "Certainly, you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you."

At this, Peter's eyes blazed with fury, and the Bible says that he cursed and swore enough to make a sailor blush: "I do not know the man." Period. *I never met him, know nothing about him and have nothing to do with him.*

And then that blamed rooster started crowing, and Peter ran out through the crowd and "wept bitterly" (26:75). And this is where chapter 26 of Matthew's gospel ends, as though the writer is too embarrassed for Peter's sake to follow him further into the night.

The Pilate Betrayal: Politics Rather than Truth

Pilate's behavior was indeed a betrayal because he could have put an end to the proceedings of this kangaroo court if he wanted too. But he, too, was a spineless coward and his political position was tenuous. He loved his job, and he betrayed Jesus to keep his career and professional opportunities viable.

The Bible says that "when Pilate saw that he could do nothing," he literally washed his hands before the crowd and passed the buck. "I am innocent of this man's blood" (27:24). Truth is, Pilate seldom did anything. He was a small, insignificant political appointee in the Roman quicksand of this far-flung outpost of the empire. He could not care less. He was positioned in a cozy office, as a servant to the powers that be, and his villa and lifestyle were all he cared about. The sooner this riot was over, the better.

Sometimes, it's not convenient to stand up for Jesus and every virtue, value, teaching and truth Jesus stood for. It certainly was not politically correct for this procurator to grow a spine, put on his big-boy pants, and stand up for the truth and for what is good, right and fair. Instead, he asked the one question that secured his place not only in the Bible, but in the annals of history: "What is truth?" he said to Jesus (John 18:38). Whatever he thought the truth was, it was an inconvenient truth, and Pilate goes down in history as a man who, when he had a great opportunity, completely mishandled it, securing his place in history's Hall of Infamy.

How About The Rest of Us

So, why do *we* betray Jesus? It could be that our motives for running away from Jesus are similar to these three rascals: Greed, cowardice and political correctness.

Yet, it is also likely — even after five weeks of Lenten worship and confession — that we don't believe that we *would* betray our faith. Rather, come this Maundy Thursday, we will declare with Peter, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you … even though I must die with you, I will not deny you" (26:33, 35).

Why do we keep our faith in a closet?

Why do we hide our light under a basket?

How many of our neighbors know we are devout Christians? Have we ever made an effort to reach out to our neighbors?

Does the language we use at home and at work reflect a relationship with Jesus? Or is our language coarse and crude?

Are we abusive, degrading and belittling of others? Do we bicker and gossip?

Are we unconcerned about addictions, unwilling to get help?

All three of these figures regretted what they did. Their own actions condemned them, as will ours if we do not stay faithful and true. And honestly, given what is going on in our culture right now, standing up for Jesus is not that radical or dangerous.

And, while we're getting real here, this litany of questions may not indicate that we intend to be betrayers of Jesus. It might only indicate that we're human.

Yet the distance between a God-fearing human and a godless human is slight, since the latter can match Christians in every category of good behavior any day of the week, and sometimes do it better.

But *a godless human doesn't claim to know Jesus.* We do.

The problem for Christians is that when we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus, we have to step up to the plate; we have to match the altruistic behavior of godless but good human beings. Failing that, we're open to the accusation of the servant girl, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean" … so why are you here by the fire pretending you don't know him? (26:69).

Is betrayal in our blood? As we begin our observance of Holy Week, let us pray that in our daily lives, we will remain faithful and true witnesses of our resurrected Lord.

May the peace of God . . .

#349 – Ah, Holy Jesus