

“Judas Revealed”

John 12:1-8

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

April 7, 2019

Sometimes a main event is undermined by a subplot that commands attention of its own.

For example, the lack of diversity among nominees can undermine the Academy Awards.

A brawl can undermine an otherwise well-played baseball game.

Sometimes a main event is undermined by a subplot that commands attention of its own.

Such is the case with Judas’s brash interruption of Mary’s act of compassion toward Jesus.

In the subplot of the main event recorded in the first few verses of Chapter 12 of John’s gospel, Judas is revealed as “the one who was about to betray” Jesus. No more hiding in the shadows. Jesus knows it, and Judas knows it, and now the others close to Jesus begin to wonder. Judas had been entrusted by Jesus to manage the common purse, with which the needs of his band of followers were met. But in fact, Judas had been helping himself to the treasury as he chose, on the sly. Jesus knows it, and now Judas knows that Jesus knows it!

Judas revealed!

Remember that the writings in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the “synoptic” gospels, meaning that they are somewhat harmonious. Among the three evangelists to whom these books are attributed, there is a large measure of agreement regarding the stories of Jesus’s life, activities, and general ministry.

The Gospel of John is markedly different: John is not interested in relaying or describing the various deeds of Jesus and his disciples, over the three year period of their travels from Galilee to Jerusalem. John’s focus is on the unique, unprecedented event of Christ, so to speak—Christ as the expression of God’s saving grace for the world. The attention of this gospel is on explaining what it means that “God so loved the world...”

Amplifying this contrast among the four gospels, there are many, more subtle ways in which John turns out to be different. For example, in each of the Synoptic Gospels, Judas is listed last among

the twelve disciples. In Matthew chapter 10, in Mark chapter 3, and in Luke chapter 6, he is identified as Judas Iscariot. Matthew and Mark describe him as “the one who betrayed Jesus”. Luke describes him as “the one who became a traitor”.

But in the Gospel of John, there is no such listing of the twelve by name. Yet there is, in this history written independently by John, an early reference to Judas. Reportedly, in a conversation during the early stages of their fledgling mission, still in Galilee, Jesus reassures Peter: “Did I not choose you, the twelve?” And Jesus continues, almost dismissively: “Yet one of you is the devil.” John quickly clarifies: “He was speaking of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, for though one of the twelve, he was going to betray him.”

Judas revealed.

It is as if Judas is looking in the mirror! No more hiding in the shadows! Judas revealed!

There may be a clue as to the destiny of this man in his very name: Judas Iscariot. Some scholarly research connects the derivation of “Iscariot” with the concept of reward, or even dagger-bearer. The most likely meaning is from the Hebrew word for a place called “Kerioth”. “Ish” is the Hebrew word for “man”. Put “Ish” and “Kerioth” together and you have “Ishkerioth”—“Iscariot”—the man from Cariot: Judas Iscariot. The reward seeker! The dagger bearer! And being from Kerioth makes Judas the ONLY non-Galilean among the twelve—the only “outsider” among the apostles intentionally selected by Jesus.

Interesting, isn’t it, that in our contemporary political culture, people go to extremes to prove their status as “outsiders”, since the label of “Washington insider” or “inside the beltway” is virtually the death knell for a politician with aspirations.

In this case, as the one who was different from the others, Judas from the very beginning probably had the feeling that he was the odd man out. He may well have been struggling with a frustrated ambition. Yes, he was the treasurer of the enterprise, a high place of honor to be sure. But he was not one of the three most intimately associated with Jesus: Peter, James, and John. He was an “outsider” with no chance of breaking into the exclusive fraternity of “insiders”. It is not difficult to imagine that his jealousy only increased as the mission advanced. It is not difficult to imagine that bitterness would consume him, twisting his love for Jesus into disdain for Jesus, leading finally to betrayal.

Frank S. Mead, an authority on the historic church, and a respected editor of religious publications, called Judas “the man who might have been”.

Judas revealed! Looking in the mirror! No more hiding in the shadows! “The man who might have been!”

What is this mysterious character doing in the main event with Martha and Mary?

As a recruit, Judas was in fact entrusted by Jesus. Perhaps Jesus was appealing to his sense of honor. Perhaps Jesus was trying to touch his heart, telling him that he was needed and loved.

As treasurer of the Jesus enterprise, Judas must have had some fiduciary abilities, and that may have tempted him to a certain conceit about his prominence. His fondness for handling money may have nurtured the thief within him, and ultimately the traitor within him.

As a man--an embittered man—Judas’s outlook on life was by some measure warped. He has just witnessed an act of exquisite tenderness by Mary, and all he can see is extravagant waste. A warped mind and a warped heart can create a warped view of the most innocent, well-intended events.

Judas revealed! The man who might have been!

So there is a subplot weaving through this main event, which on the face of it features Jesus and Lazarus. There is a subplot twisting among Martha, Mary. And Judas. What is the lesson here for you and me in this play within the play? What is the lesson here for you and me in the standoff between Martha and Mary, and in the standoff between Mary and Judas? Where would you or I be in this scene with Jesus? For which of these character roles might you or I find ourselves most naturally being cast?

Are you back in the kitchen with Martha, the practical, reserved one, showing love for Jesus by offering your skills in the wings, out of the glare of the spotlight? It is just as possible to serve Jesus in the kitchen backstage as it is from center stage, that is, in the eye of the public. But would you sometimes be a little jealous, wishing your sister did not always have to be center stage? Would you be Martha?

Or would you be Mary, worshipping Jesus with all out compassion, risking the wrath of a hard-working sister, and the anger of culturally biased men, and the resentment of an outsider like Judas, who is already burdened with a warped heart? In Palestine, a respectable woman would not allow her hair to flow freely in public, let alone use it to comfort a man so lovingly. Mary represents love’s

extravagance, only wishing she could give to her Master even more perfumed oil than she possessed.
Would you be Mary?

Or would you be Judas, picking a fight with humble Mary, pretending to have altruistic motives (“That oil is too valuable to be wasted like this; it could be given to the poor!”--while undermining Jesus and the main event? Would you be cast as Judas, hiding behind a well-positioned public persona that Jesus knows is not a reflection of the true you? Judas may be sly, or think that he is. But Jesus is slier!

So there we are in Bethany, a few days before Passover, supporting the main characters Jesus and Lazarus, but in the ensemble with quiet, loyal Martha, and bold, emotional Mary, and embittered, resentful Judas—Judas the outsider—Judas the dagger bearer--Judas revealed!

There we are, as if looking in the mirror.

The woman...who might have been.

The man...who might have been.