

“Peter and Judas”
Jake Hofmeister
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
February 26, 2017

Psalm 32: 1-5
Matthew 26: 69-75

Today, I want to visit two famous biblical stories that many of us will spend some time with in a few weeks during the season of Lent. The first story is Judas’ betrayal of Jesus which causes Jesus’ arrest and leads to his eventual death on the cross. The other story, from our second scripture reading in Matthew, is Peter’s threefold denial of his connection to Jesus.

And I would like to focus, especially on the aftermath of these events. What happens with our two disciples, Judas and Peter, when they deny Christ? What happens in the community afterwards? And for us today, what happens in the church after Jesus is born and lives among us?

What first crosses your mind when you hear the names Peter and Judas? Maybe, you’re thinking one’s a loyal disciple and one’s a deceitful one. Or maybe, you’re thinking, the rock of the church versus the traitor of Jesus. Or maybe even good versus evil.

Let’s discuss that one for a bit, this good versus evil concept. Throughout society, we are bombarded by dramatic sagas of good versus evil—the bible’s own David versus Goliath, Luke Skywalker versus Darth Vader, Batman versus the Joker. The idea of good versus evil is interwoven throughout our culture and has deeply impacts the way we see the world. Of course the paradigm example is God versus Satan, and many people interpret their spiritual lives through this lens. So what is the good and evil imagery all about? And what do the stories of Judas and Peter tell us about how we—Presbyterian Americans—are supposed to live out our relationship with God in this community?

Generally in pop culture, when it comes to the disciples, Peter is the ultimate good guy and Judas is the ultimate bad guy. Peter whose name in Greek is Petros, meaning rock, is the rock where upon Jesus builds the church. In Matthew’s gospel, he is given the keys to the church. Catholic’s view Peter as the first pope. We’re talking about the ultimate good guy here, a hero, one of the most beloved people of all time—a guy who can heal the sick and preach the word and has faith.

Now let’s look at Judas. Many see this guy as the ultimate villain. Judas ends up using his close proximity to Jesus to help the corrupt officials. He betrays his innocent leader for a small amount of silver. For some, this act has gone down as one of the greatest sins in history. The phrase Judas’ kiss has even been

appropriated to symbolize an act of deceit and sin. And as the rest of the story shows, Judas ends up in a much different place than Peter.

Judas, realizing what he has done, feels so guilty, so sinful that he takes his own life. It is clear that a portion of history sees Peter is the ultimate good, and Judas as the ultimate bad. But really are these characters that different? Let's take a closer look.

While many of us do think of Peter and Judas in opposite lights, today's scripture passage, if you look closely, paints quite a different picture. Judas does become the betrayer, the one to whom Jesus refers at the Last Supper. It is an obvious, premeditated betrayal. Judas sells intelligence so the guards can capture Jesus.

But then, what does Peter do? He denies his identity and his connection to Jesus, not once, but three times. It doesn't have the obvious dire consequences connected to it like Judas' does. Jesus doesn't get caught because of Peter's denial. And it's not premeditated. But if you focus not on the obvious consequences, but what happens inside both Peter and Judas, what it means for their identity, their faith, and their witness to Jesus: the two really aren't that different.

They both, when faced with temptations and fear, denied their deepest convictions, falsified their identities, and contributed directly or indirectly to Christ's suffering.

And I don't really blame them. All the disciples faced the possibility of death and imprisonment for being connected to Jesus. And in their own ways, they all gave into the fear of losing their lives and comforts--Judas most dramatically, then Peter somewhat less dramatic, and then the rest of the disciples by hiding from the threatening events. I've always wondered at the Last Supper when Jesus said, "And one of you will betray me," why he didn't instead say, "And each one of you will betray me in your own way." That may have been closer to the truth.

Some scholars suggest that Jesus saying, "And one of you sitting here at the table will betray me," does refer to Judas, but also to each reader as well. It's written in a way to invite the reader to look into one's own life, to examine one's own sins. It invites us to hold up a mirror to our own life, to see when we have not been true to our faith in Jesus and to our own identity as Christians--when we've been too scared to sacrifice comforts or prestige, to live our call from God.

Can you remember a time in your life when you denied your connection to Jesus or to the church?

Most of us hear today can probably think of several examples.

So why do some look at Judas and Peter in such different lights, if they are so similar in that way? Parts of our culture and church tend to view the world in a dualistic way, in a black and white way. There are either good people or evil people. It's easier for us to understand the complex world if we divide it into two neat categories.

I don't really blame some forms of culture and Christianity for promoting this view. Like I said it's easy to understand. It also helps us distance ourselves from our own sins by placing blame on others. If we fool ourselves into believing that others are evil, and we are not, this makes us feel so much better. It makes us feel righteous and accomplished. And we don't want to look at our own sins and evils because it's painful, so we tend to project them onto others.

So instead of seeing the world as dualistic, as good and evil, I challenge us to see the world as monistic—created good, but mistakes happen. We are all good at our core, but we have a sinful tendency, as our reformed tradition reminds us. It is complex and hard to understand when bad things do happen and why some people do what they do. But it would serve us best not to give into dualism that promotes a distancing from another. As it says in Genesis, "God saw all that God made, and it was very good."

Both Peter and Judas are created good, but are both sinful humans. So why do they end up in such different places?

A traditional answer is that Judas was not able to deal with the guilt and despair caused by his treacherous actions. The weight of his sin blinded him to the possibility of reconciliation and forgiveness. A traditional answer for Peter says, unlike Judas, he was able to deal with his guilt and repent. He was able, though weighed down heavily by his sin, to see that forgiveness was possible. He was able to choose Christ even after he had betrayed his faithfulness to him.

These traditional answers, I believe, only tell half the story. These answers focus only on their individuality in the midst of sinful action. While very important, it's only part of it. And it also promotes the false duality of existence. It implies that Peter had some abilities to recover that Judas did not. While I do think personal choice and motivation is very important in our relationship with God and has great impact on our ethical practice, I don't buy the interpretation that Peter is just a stronger person. This is an over-simplification. There's more going on.

I suggest that the difference between these two men lie not merely in their personal character, but also in the community supporting them. I am suggesting some very significant pastoral care going on in the background in Peter's case, and a great lack of which in Judas'. I am suggesting that after this passage, Judas was left alone to struggle with his demons, while the disciples and the rest of the community embraced Peter, empathized with his struggles, gave him a space to process his guilt and heal. It wasn't that one is good and the other is

evil, it was that for some reason, the healing power of the community and the abundant love of Jesus reached Peter and failed Judas.

I'm speculating here, but it's possible that no one helped Judas because they judged him, they saw what he did, and they made him evil. It's possible they were not able to see that everyone is a complex mixture of goodheartedness and sinful tendencies. Maybe, they were not able to put their own issues aside and embrace Judas when he needed it the most. Maybe, Judas' act made them so uncomfortable with their own sinfulness, that they were too scared to help him. Maybe, they were too angry with him. Maybe, they didn't want to be seen helping an evil person. These complacencies may have even contributed to Judas feeling like he had no other choice, but to end his own life...a true tragedy.

So on one hand we have Judas and on the other hand we have Peter...both disciples, both denying Jesus. Not too different, but their outcomes were very different. One remained in despair and the other was fully redeemed through Jesus' limitless love.

I believe this illustration must serve as a reminder and a charge to the church. A reminder that even in our darkest moments when we deny the things we believe in most, that Jesus Christ's loving-kindness and the healing power of the community can lead to forgiveness and reconciliation. It's also a reminder what can go wrong if we fail to nurture someone through a difficult time. It's a reminder that we are called to be Christ's presence to all, to give pastoral care as a community to each other.

So it's a charge to the church, that we must be open, merciful, and gracious to the Peter's and the Judas's in our midst. They are the people in our church. They are the people in our families. They are you and me.

And really, when you think about it, that's what it means to be a church that takes the season of Lent seriously. A church that remembers God's forgiveness and reconciliation is available to us through Jesus Christ. So let's be there for each other, let's take care of each other. Let's love each other, so that we can make sure that everyone ends up like Peter, not like Judas. Amen.