

SERMON TEXT FOR EASTER 7B
PREACHED MAY 13, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA
TEXT: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Often, actors are remembered for that one well-known and well-loved character from TV or the movies: Henry Winkler as "the Fonz" on *Happy Days*; William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy as Captain Kirk and Spock, respectively, in *Star Trek*; Bea Arthur as TV's *Maude* and Jean Stapleton as Archie Bunker's wife, Edith in the ground-breaking *All In the Family*.

This kind of pigeon-holing into a specific role plagued one of Jesus' disciples as well, and you can probably guess who it is. Of course, it's Judas Iscariot, known as the One Who Betrayed Jesus. This one singular act indelibly marks Judas' name, his history, and the church's memory. In the story of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume, all four gospels report an objection being raised that the perfume was not sold for the poor. In the gospel of John, the objection is raised by "*Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him).*" Only John adds further commentary, "*He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.*"

So Judas has this reputation, and the reason Judas' betrayal cuts so deeply lies in the other way that all four gospels identify him - as "*one of the Twelve.*" Powerful opponents called for Jesus' execution, Pilate sentenced him to death, and Roman soldiers nailed him to the cross - all horrific acts. But what separates them from Judas is that they were outsiders. Judas was one of the most inside of the insiders.

Today's account in Acts from the early days of the church relates a story of Peter, another of the Twelve, helping the community regroup, naming the pain of betrayal: "*Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus ... was one of our number and shared in our ministry.*" When Jesus sent out disciples to preach, teach, and heal, Judas was among them. Except for John's allegation that Judas was both betrayer and embezzler, the gospels offer no mention that, prior to Gethsemane, Judas was considered a bad apple.

So how could one of Jesus' 12 have committed such a deplorable act? Some argue that Judas' fate was sealed, that he did not have a choice in the matter of betrayal, that he was a mere pawn in the grand scheme of God's salvation story.

As for Judas' complex motives and their tragic outcome, most if not all of them are lost to us today. Yes, he received his infamous "*thirty pieces of silver,*" but I suspect that other factors came into play, including some that he himself could not fathom.

From this we can make three observations. First, Judas' betrayal of Jesus is unremarkable; in other words, he was not the only one of Jesus' disciples to "behave badly." Peter denied that he would ever deny the Lord, but he did so three times. The other eleven all made the same promise, but when Jesus was arrested all the disciples deserted him and fled. So one could say that Judas does not have the market on betrayal of his Savior.

Second, after their betrayal and denial, Judas and Peter responded in similar ways. After aiding and abetting in the condemnation of Jesus, Judas was *"filled with remorse"* and tried to return the blood money. Peter broke down and wept.

Finally, in playing the most undesirable role in all of human history, in some sense Judas took our place and triggered the events that lead to the greatest good for all humanity, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So, back to our story in Acts. With Judas' demise, the disciples were down to eleven. Now, twelve is a good biblical number, a number with significance (i.e. the 12 Tribes of Israel). So, it seemed good and proper to get the disciples back to a dozen. There was a position to fill.

They came up with a short list of criteria. And then they cast lots, so that it wouldn't be them who chose, but God - because discernment is about listening to God, and seeing who God is calling.

If we are familiar even with little snippets of Biblical history, we know that leadership was never based on resumes or experience. God called Moses, an eighty year-old shepherd, who had murder on his record. He called Aaron, who had great experience making little golden calf statues. He called David, the youngest son, and also a shepherd. He called Mary, a little girl. He called Peter, a fisherman, Simon the Zealot, and Paul, a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians.

As recorded in Acts, Matthias is chosen as Judas' successor. And then, just as quickly, he disappears from the story, never to be mentioned again by name - only implicitly present in mentions of the apostles or the Twelve.

Some would argue that even though Matthias was ultimately chosen by the apostles through the casting of lots, the Spirit elected Paul to carry the apostolic mantle left vacant by Judas. Clearly the criteria established by Peter and seconded by apostolic consent - namely, that the one to replace Judas ought to have been witness to the entire ministry of Jesus from the beginning - was not seconded by the Holy Spirit. Clearly, Paul was the more important figure.

What do we learn from today's story and the selection of Matthias as "replacement" for Judas? Only this: God rarely calls the dashing, young, energetic person with twenty years of experience in the field who can speak five languages. God calls ordinary people to do God's extraordinary work.

We are at an important precipice here at Zion. Who is God calling to help lead us into the future? What gifts or skills are you hiding that could be used to help us in our mission? In what ways are you claiming that you're not good enough to serve, that you are ignoring God's call? *"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show which one[s] you have chosen."* AMEN