

# Follow the Money

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren  
Sermon for Sunday, March 14, 2010, Matthew 26:6-16;27:1-10

You know those movies, where the kidnapers demand a million dollars in ransom, and the rich guy goes to the bank, withdraws the cash and puts it in a brief case? This may surprise you, but it can't be done at least not in an ordinary briefcase. Your standard briefcase, you see, only holds about \$780,000 in \$100 bills, which are the largest bills that still circulate. And, incidentally, if you could get a million dollars in a briefcase, it would weigh over twenty pounds!

Twenty pounds of hundred dollar bills seems like a lot, but a million dollars doesn't go nearly as far as it used to. A million dollars is added to the National Debt every 48 seconds. If you put a million dollars in a CD at the highest rate currently available (1.58%), it would yield only about \$16,000 per year in interest! There are over 6 million millionaires in the United States alone! That's roughly one out of every fifty Americans. Have 5 really smart kids? It is going to cost you a million dollars just to put those kids through 4 years at Harvard! This coming season, Alex Rodriguez of the New York Yankees is due to earn about a million dollars every 20 or so at-bats.

Still, a million dollars is a magical number. And people can be persuaded to do a lot of things for a million bucks. Some folks would marry a person they didn't love. Others would work at a job they despise. Still others would give up their families, their religion, or their citizenship. What would you do?

In our text for this morning, it seems that Judas sells out a good friend for a whole lot less than a million dollars. He was offered a mere thirty pieces of silver, the typical price paid for a slave in those days, roughly equivalent to \$5,000 or \$10,000 a considerable sum, but far from a million. Judas took the money and led the authorities to Jesus. That makes him a bad guy, right?

He certainly has a bad reputation, betrayer, thief, phony, fool. If you call someone "a Judas," those are fighting words. Don't expect them to let it go without a response. People don't even name their dogs Judas!

Well, I'm not here to tell you what to call your dog, but I am here to invite you to reconsider what you know (or think you know) about Judas. It isn't fair to simply treat him as a stock character, one dimensional, a stereo-type. Even though the scripture doesn't have all that much to say about Judas, what it does say is a bit more nuanced than most folks assume. So let's take a look.

We meet him first as just one among the twelve called by Jesus, empowered and sent out on a mission like all the other disciples. And we see him again, on the night of the Last Supper,

reclining at dinner close enough to Jesus to dip his bread in the same bowl. And, of course, he was trusted enough to be the treasurer for the group.

And as for the infamous betrayal, we may never know for sure why he did it. William Avery, of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, suggests that Judas betrayed Jesus because he felt he had been betrayed by Jesus! Jesus had promised that the kingdom of God was at hand, but years went by and nothing really changed. The Romans were still in power, making the lives of the Jews in Palestine difficult. Jesus had spoken of justice and peace coming, but where were they? Maybe Judas did feel betrayed.

We don't know. But this much we do know, he had a change of heart. In the 27th chapter of Matthew's gospel, we read: "When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood!'" Judas gave the money back. He didn't want it. He wanted to turn the clock back, to un-do his dastardly deed. But he couldn't.

When you look at it this way, it is hard not to feel some sympathy for Judas. Who among us hasn't done something we have later come to regret, but couldn't undo? Who among us doesn't have regrets that haunt us at times? Who among us hasn't failed a friend or a loved one in some way, large or small?

Does the idea that we might have something in common with Judas make you uncomfortable? Me, too. Part of the problem, I think, is that we don't like our villains to be so complicated. We want them to be like they are in the comic books or in the movies, totally dark, nasty, sociopaths with no redeeming qualities whatsoever, the very personification of evil. We like our villains that way because it makes them easier to hate.

Some bad guys might actually be like that, but not most. I think most of the people who do really bad things are like Judas. They're complicated. Along with the terrible things they do, they also do a lot of good things. They are also capable of regret, remorse, repentance.

Take Victor Woods, for example. As a teenager, he orchestrated a series of armed robberies in suburban Chicago. In March of 1984 he was caught by a detective named Lester Aradi, who had been investigating the robberies for weeks. Woods went to jail, awaiting trial. Aradi visited him, bringing candy bars and copies of Mad magazine, hoping to gather information about Woods' criminal associates. Woods gave him nothing, but appreciated the candy bars and Aradi's professionalism.

Woods spent several years in prison, then returned to a life of crime. This time, it was credit card fraud on a massive scale. Again he was caught, and again he spent years in prison. Finally, in 1997, out of prison for a year and a half, Woods was ready to turn the corner. And his first step was to call the man who had first arrested him. He called Aradi, who by then was by then a patrol division commander, and said something Aradi had never heard before from someone he had arrested. Woods said, "I just got out and I wanted to apologize personally for committing those robberies."

Aradi invited Woods to come speak to a class Aradi was teaching. Now Woods, who has written a book about turning his life around, speaks to law enforcement agencies and prisoners around the country. And he credits Aradi with accepting his apology and giving him a second chance. “He didn’t have to,” Woods says, “[but] he did, and I give him credit for being where I am today.”

We can’t help but wonder how things might have been different for Judas if, when he repented and gave the money back, the chief priests and elders would have responded differently. Or what might have happened if Judas had gotten the chance to express his regret and repentance directly to Jesus? Who knows? Judas might have become one of the leading disciples, one who could speak to others about what forgiveness really means and how it can really change someone’s life.

But, of course, that’s not what happened. The chief priests and elders didn’t care about Judas. They were determined to go through with their plans. And Judas probably had no way to get to Jesus at that point, as Jesus was in the custody of the Roman soldiers who were preparing to put him to death. So, filled with despair and guilt, Judas went off and ended his own life.

So what is it that we can take away from this tragic story about the man who sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver? First, it serves to remind us that life is not so simple. It isn’t like the comic books, where there are bad guys and good guys, and everybody knows who they are. Rather, the struggle between good and evil takes place within each of us, and we are all capable of doing terrible things, often for reasons that seem to make sense at the time.

Second, it reminds us that sin is more serious than we sometimes think. Sometimes we think it is just a matter of breaking rules. But when we sin, we release evil into the world, and we can’t always control it thereafter. Things get out of hand. We can’t undo the situation, even if we later want to.

Finally, the story of Judas reminds us that how we respond when people do express repentance or seek forgiveness can make all the difference in the world. It can be hard to grant forgiveness, especially when the people who have sinned against us have done damage that can’t be undone. But Jesus looked down from the cross and said, “Father forgive them.” What might have happened if Judas had been there to hear it? The power of forgiveness is the power to heal and make whole.

As we move into the second half of the season of Lent, it is a good time to think about those things we have done for which we need to seek forgiveness, and those things for which we have the power to offer forgiveness. And may our hearts never be so overwhelmed by despair that we forget that God’s forgiveness is always available to us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.