

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Between Betrayal and Denial”**  
**Mark 14:17-31**  
**March 20, 2016**

**“On the night he was betrayed...”** is how the Apostle Paul describes that Thursday evening in the upper room ...when he’s writing a letter to the Corinthians. Of course there are a lot of ways he could describe the same night.

**“On the night of the Passover meal...”** would be a little more clear about exactly what he was talking about. After all, we know that Jesus and the disciples are gathered there in the upper room to observe the Passover meal together. We’ve been following the narrative of Mark and we know that’s what this moment is. And we know they weren’t the only ones. There were thousand of people, pilgrims from across the world, who had descended on Jerusalem exactly for this purpose. They did every year at this time.

The Passover meal was the celebration of the Exodus story... their ancient history. Over a thousand years before this night, the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. God used Moses and ten plagues to loosen Pharaoh’s grip over the Hebrew people... And you may remember that it was really the 10<sup>th</sup> plague that did it: The angel of death that swept through Egypt.

But the Hebrews were told to sacrifice a lamb, put it’s blood on the door post... and the angel of death would “pass over” their house that night. And then they were to take the lamb and make it into a meal... but not a slow lingering. They were supposed to be packed and ready to go. There was no time to let the bread rise before it baked. So, with their suitcases full and stacked by the door, they ate unleavened bread and roasted lamb... the sacred meal... the sacrificial lamb... that was both protection from death, and food for the journey.

The Passover was the great moment of their deliverance from slavery...

their deliverance from economic oppression,

their deliverance from religious and political oppression...

***It was the story that set them on a journey to becoming the people of God and the Passover meal was food for that journey.***

As I said, all that took place well over a thousand years before Jesus and his disciple shared that Passover meal. And it’s been another two thousand years since then. And still... this meal is celebrated. The Passover is the central salvation moment in the Old Testament.

So, you’d think when Paul is writing about that meal Jesus had with his disciples he might describe it as “The night they shared the Passover Meal...” but he doesn’t.

**“On the night he was betrayed...”**

Paul also could have called it the night Jesus had his Last Supper. Certainly it was... being that it was just hours before the crucifixion. Obviously Da Vinci describes it that way in his painting... and a lot of us are prone to call it the Last Supper, ourselves.

But Paul... draws our attention in a different direction. **“On the night... he was betrayed... he took the bread... and he took the cup.”** Paul writes. The meal, the blessing... ***it all takes place in the shadow of betrayal.***

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And Jesus seems to be keenly aware of that shadow doesn't he? In our Mark reading this morning the first thing that happens after they all sit down at the table together is that Jesus names the shadow in the room.

**“One of you will betray me...”** he says.

They're all shocked... and I imagine more than a little unsettled by the news. The first response is the same response any of us might have if we were being accused of betraying one we love. **“I would never do that!”** they say.

But at the same time, they're less than sure. Did you notice that in the reading? Look in your bibles and you're likely to see a question mark at the end of that statement.. I like the way the Common English Bible puts it, **“It's not me! ...Is it?” Jesus?**

There's some uncertainty because something deep within us is afraid that maybe, it could be. There's something inside of us that's just a little less confident in our faith and in our commitment than we'd like to let on.

I mean, imagine yourself there at the table. You're there with Jesus... your deeply beloved friend, teacher, guide. And you're there with your friends, and you hear Jesus say it. Maybe he even glances over at you for a moment when he does... **“One of you will be betray me...”**

Sure... you might be shocked at first... but you also have this sinking feeling that maybe it will be you. In fact, maybe you already have. And you start thinking about those moments you'd rather not tell anyone about... and you wonder if he knows?

But you pipe in as quick as you can... **“It's not me! ....Is it, Jesus?”**

[pause]

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Of course, we're not in the room. We're reading along, and we know who the betrayer is. We know it's Judas. What we don't know is why Judas did it. Of course, there's been a lot of speculation about that along the way.

Some have assumed he did it for the money. They did promise to pay him, after all. And some of the other gospel writers call him a thief. They are hinting that maybe... just maybe he was in it to make a few pennies.

On the one hand, it's hard to believe that Judas... who has been following Jesus as one of his closest friends for 3 years, could possibly stoop this low for a simple payload.

On the other hand, we all know that the allure of money is a cancerous force... It's like poisonous radiation leaking from nuclear waste site... that can grow death inside of you.

Who knows, maybe Judas did betray Jesus for the money. If so, he certainly wasn't the last to do so. More than one pastor and priest, more than one bishop and deacon and Sunday School teacher have done the same. You all have heard the stories as much as I have. I don't imagine most of them set out to betray Jesus for just 30 pieces of silver... But it sort of happens along the way.

Of course the thing is, it's not just silver coins in the offering plate that are stolen from God... and it's not just church leaders that do the betraying, is it? Greed has a way of working on us all... rich and poor alike. Fooling us into not being honest with ourselves about the power that money has over us.

Jesus had a lot to say about our money... and especially our relationship to our money. And I wonder... if he were to look at what we do with our resources as individuals... and what we do with our resources as a society... if he would say, "**And once again, one of you will betray me this very night...**"

Here's what I do know. Money can cloud our judgment...  
making us greedy on the one hand  
and self-righteous on the other.

We're pretty good at fooling ourselves. We're pretty good at living in the moral ambiguities... and convincing ourselves that our motivations are pure.

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You know, there's a good chance Judas' motives were pure too. There's a lot of scholars out there that don't think he betrayed Jesus for the money. It may have been a lot more altruistic than that. Remember, the disciples by this point believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the one who is supposed to set them free from their present bondage and re-establish the Kingdom to Israel.

There's a pretty good chance Judas believe that too... but wasn't buying into Jesus' whole non-violent approach and message. There's a pretty good chance Judas was convinced that Jesus needed to do more than turn over money tables in the temple and debate with the temple leadership. And that Passover night was time to make something happen before the moment passed.

It was time for action.  
And if Jesus wasn't going to get it started, he would.  
His betrayal may have been less about ending Jesus' life, and a whole lot more about forcing Jesus' hand to get on with it.

There's some pretty good reason to see this as Judas' motivation... if for no other reason that it's so often our motivation, isn't it? Let's be honest: there's an awful lot that Jesus' teaches about the Kingdom of God that just doesn't seem very practical. Jesus' methods just aren't going to get the results we're looking for:

- Turn the other cheek.
- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
- Go and be like that good Samaritan... which is a lot like saying, "go and be like that good Muslim... that good Hindu... go and be more like that good Atheist."
- "Welcome the prisoner," Jesus said, "the sick, the thirsty, the poor, the least of these..."
- The first will be last.
- The greatest in the kingdom is the servant of all.
- Blessed is the meek, the poor in spirit, those who are persecuted for my sake.
- Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.

Jesus' teachings just aren't all that practical sometimes. Some of it sure sounds a little too altruistic and a bit naive, doesn't it?

Yes, Jesus is our Lord.

And yes, we hope for his Kingdom to "come on earth as it is in heaven."  
But we're not so convinced he's got the right game plan to get there, are we?

Jesus' approach doesn't always make good policy...  
not for ourselves, and not for our political ideologies...  
any more than Judas was convinced Jesus had the right game plan for becoming the Messiah Judas believed Jesus was supposed to be.

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We don't know exactly what Judas' motivation was.  
Money?  
Misguided ambition?  
Misunderstand of Jesus Messiahship... and what it means to be his follower? All of them possible, but the gospels don't actually tell us.

The one thing Mark does say is that Judas... was **"one of the twelve."** It's how Mark repeatedly refers to him. Which means, it just might be how Mark wants us to remember Judas best. Twice in chapter 14 he refers to Judas that way:

- when Judas goes to the chief priests and offers to betray Jesus...
  - and in the Garden of Gethsemane when the betrayal happens.
- Both times he's referred to as "Judas, one of the twelve."

...which is to say that *the betrayal happens from within the community of Jesus most devote followers. The betrayal happens... among us.*

Jesus begins the meal telling us that someone will betray him... someone who sits at his own table. **“Surely, it’s not me... is it, Jesus?”**

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After supper Jesus makes another announcement. **“Tonight you will desert me. And one of you will deny me.”** By now, their defenses are up. “Absolutely not!” they all say.

Peter the most prominent of them all assures Jesus that it won’t happen. **“Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you,”** he says. And the rest of them pipe in with their **“Me too!”** and their **“Ditto’s”** and their **“What he said!”**

And the thing is, I think they really meant it. Peter was convinced he wouldn’t deny Jesus, but he probably imagined the moment all wrong. Peter probably thought his refusal to deny Jesus would be this great public moment... when he’s stand side by side with Jesus, and he’d show great courage before the whole word, and he’d prove that he’d go to the very end with Jesus!

It’s a real cinematic moment... and it’s all so romanticized isn’t it? The truth is, it’s also a very ego-driven idealism.

And so, Peter’s not ready for the moment in the way it comes, because in the moment it’s a much more subtle thing. It happens in the darkness... in some side conversation... with a woman he doesn’t even know. You almost get the sense he doesn’t even realize what he’s done...

until the rooster crows...

and he “wakes up” so to speak.

I think that’s why it’s a rooster, this symbol of waking us out of slumber. The rooster crows and something deep in him “wakes up”... and see the truth of the matter.

That’s how our denial happens too. There is some fear at work in us. Maybe we’re half asleep. Maybe it’s just in the peer pressure of a few friends, or maybe it’s off on the side when hardly anyone would even know... but there is a denial of our commitments to Jesus...

a denial of our convictions...

a denial of who we’ve said we want to be...

and that denial... might even surprise us.

So, watch out for it. Sometimes it looks like fear.

Sometimes it may just be silence.

Maybe it’s a simple lie, a half-truth... like Peter’s response in the firelight where he simply says: **“I’m not sure what you’re talking about...”**

Denial? ...It may just being an unwillingness to take the risk of loving others and loving God with a full-hearted kind of love.

Here's what I do know. For most of us, denial is so much more subtle than we'd like to admit... and a whole lot less public than standing in some gladiator arena before crowds of watchers.

Your faithfulness... is not going to be measured by some great public sacrifice... or great gesture... because those things are generally more about our ego than about faithfulness to Christ.

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Well all that being said, it *is* a bit shocking how quickly this all plays out and how fickle the disciples turn out to be. But this is one of the great themes of Mark's gospel.

It's a theme that I've been hinting at over the last few months, but never quite named. One of the most uniquely striking themes of Mark's gospel is *failed discipleship*. *Failed discipleship*.

All along the way the disciples have failed to understand what Jesus is teaching. They have failed to listen well.

They have failed to re-imagine the Kingdom of God as Jesus has described it.

They have failed to understand what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

And finally as the gospel comes to a climax, the twelve disciples betray, deny, and flee in fear. The gospel of Mark is a story of *failed discipleship*...

and Mark is trying to help us readers realize... just how easy it is for us to miss the point... and how easy it will be to fail to re-imagine the Kingdom of God... and fail to follow Jesus.

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**"On the night he was betrayed..."** Paul describes it. And in our gospel reading today, that's how Jesus seems to describe it too.

At the beginning of the meal he says, **"One of you will betray me."**

At the end of the meal, he says, **"One of you will deny me."**

But between the betrayal and the denial, Jesus breaks the bread, gives it to them, and says, **"Eat. This is my body given to you."** And then, he takes the cup and says, **"Drink, this is my blood, the blood of the new covenant."**

Between betrayal and denial, Jesus offers them this sacred meal. In other words this sacred meal, is God's great **"yes"** even in the face of humanities consistent **"No."**

This meal is God's grace given to us... even in the midst of our betrayal and denial. It is given to us and offered to us... despite... or maybe because of our failed discipleship.

And it's not just for us. Jesus says, **"This is the blood of my covenant, which is poured out for many..."** His life is given for the whole world... the world that is trapped and enslaved in it's own betrayal and denial.

In a world caught up in wars after war...  
a world plagued by violence piled upon violence...  
In a world where everyone seems to only be looking after their own self interest...  
a world where immigrants only find more hostility rather than a welcomed home,  
a world that wants to scapegoat the most marginalized among us...  
in a world that shouts instead of listens,  
that blames instead of heals...

In a world trapped between betrayal and denial... Jesus says, "This is my body...  
which is broken for you... take and eat. Receive the gift of my life. "

***Receive it not because you are somehow worthy,  
or somehow have earned it.  
Receive it because you recognize you are hungry...  
and you need it.***

Between betrayal and denial... Jesus offers us his own self in this meal.  
Take it within... again and again.  
Receive the grace of God, given to you,  
and may your deep hunger be filled.

Amen.