

“WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE: II – BETRAYED AND DENIED”

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Psalm 41

Mark 14:17-21

From the time Jesus started his earthly, public ministry it cost him, and it cost him dearly. That’s why I chose to preach this sermon series for Lent entitled “Willing to Pay the Price.” Because there was an enormous price to pay for us, and Jesus did it willingly, even though it cost him everything.

We looked last week at the very beginning of his ministry, right after his baptism in the River Jordan. He came up out of the waters of baptism, and went right into the wilderness of temptation, and those forty days and nights cost him. They cost him physically – he was hungry and thirsty, he was dusty and dirty, and he had no place to lay his head save on the hard ground.

They cost him emotionally – first by the loneliness, but mostly by the horrible battles he had with the devil. Temptation after temptation thrust in his face. The devil was wily, and tried to get Jesus to take the easy way out, not to live sacrificially but to live selfishly. How much easier it would have been for Jesus to feed his hunger and assuage his thirst, and to accept the devil’s offer of power and might.

But he didn’t. He stood up in the face of temptation and it cost him – a lot. But he was willing to pay the price because he trusted God and he knew what he had come to do for us, and was determined to do it.

After he left the wilderness of temptation, his ministry really started with a vengeance. He picked twelve to be his disciples, and together they moved from place to place teaching, healing, caring, challenging. It was going so well that people began to try to get to Jesus, great crowds began to swarm around him, and there came a point when he could barely find a moment alone. Imagine never being alone, never finding a quiet moment without crowds clamoring for your attention – what a price to pay!

Ah, but the more “success” he had, the more opposition rose against him. The powers-that-be didn’t like what they were seeing. They thought he was playing fast and loose with the laws of their religion, doing things like healing on the Sabbath,

which wasn't allowed – and they couldn't have it. So they began to plot against him – and he would pay the price.

You all know the story, it got worse and worse as time went along. The more Jesus loved, the more he healed, the more he changed hearts and lives, the more vicious his enemies became. They would stop at nothing to bring him down.

And all of that was bad, really, really bad. But today, I want to spend some time looking at a couple of incidents that well, perhaps hurt Jesus even more than all that – and they were Judas' betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and Peter's denial of him.

It was on the occasion of the Last Supper, when Jesus was at table with his twelve disciples, that he told them that one of them would betray him. He already knew it was coming, but most of them didn't, and after he said that, they questioned him. "Who is it, Lord? Is it I?"

Only one knew the answer to the question, and it was Judas. Judas, you might remember, was the treasurer for the group. No one really knows why he did what he did to Jesus, but there's been a lot of speculation about it. Writer Frederick Buechner has said this:

"Nobody can be sure, of course, why Judas sold Jesus out although according to John's gospel, he already had a reputation for dipping into the poor box from time to time so the cash may have been part of it. If, like the other disciples, he was perennially worried about where he stood in the pecking order, he may also have been reacting to some imagined slight. Maybe he thought his job as treasurer to the outfit was beneath him. Another possibility is that he had gotten fed up with waiting for Jesus to take the world by storm and hoped that betraying him might force him to show his hand at last. Or maybe, because nothing human is ever uncomplicated, something of all of these was involved." (Frederick Buechner, "Judas," *Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who*, p. 82.)

Whatever the reason, Judas, one of those closest to Jesus, one he counted as disciple and friend, would, not long after that dinner, help a band of people capture Jesus. And the signal he told them to watch for was a kiss. He would go up to Jesus and kiss him on the cheek, and that would be a sign for them to swoop in and take him. Betraying Jesus was bad enough, betraying him with a sign of love made it all the worse.

And barely had that taken place, barely had Jesus' heart broken over the betrayal by one of his own, and barely had he been taken away to the high priest, than another of his inner circle turns on him as well. And this time, it was the big guy – Peter – one of the inner circle, one of those closest to Jesus.

He was standing in the courtyard of the high priest, and a servant girl comes along, looks at him and stops in her tracks. She recognizes him as being one of Jesus' disciples, and confronts him. "You were with him," she says, to which he replies, "No, I wasn't." A second time she confronts him, and a second time he denies it. A third time, she does it again, and that time Peter swears an oath that he absolutely, positively does not know Jesus.

And when he does a rooster crows, and immediately Peter remembers that Jesus told him he would deny him three times before the cock crowed, and knowing how he had failed Jesus miserably, Peter broke down and wept.

Judas and Peter, two people so close to Jesus, two people on whom he should have been able to count until the bitter end, turned away when he needed them the most - one betrayed and the other denied. And all of it because Jesus was doing what God had called him to do for us and for our salvation. What a price he paid!

Every resource I looked at this week seemed to have some of the same words in it – words that went like this: Perhaps there is no greater pain in life, than the pain of betrayal. One writer put it this way:

"To be betrayed is to be vulnerable to a unique kind of pain. It can take many years to recover from the sting of betrayal."

Some of you may know all too well the truth of those words. He continues: "Many people know the sting of betrayal first-hand. It comes in the form of a gambling addiction or an extramarital affair. Maybe the betrayer says, 'I never loved you in the first place.' Perhaps it is the relative who pawns family heirlooms to buy drugs. Maybe it is the financial advisor who takes your retirement money and runs. Perhaps the betrayer shared with others what you had offered in confidence. The betrayer may be the company where you worked for years as a loyal employee, only to find yourself in the unemployment line. Maybe the betrayer stole your childhood. Maybe the betrayer is the one who sent you to the emergency room with a bloody face." (*Feasting on the Word, Lenten Companion*, David L. Bartlett, et al, p. 246)

Well, you get the idea, and if you've been one who's been betrayed, just hearing those things probably sent a familiar chill up your spine. To be betrayed, especially by someone close to you, is a pain like no other. Jesus felt that pain, not once, but twice in the space of mere hours, and sadly, would feel it further when nearly all of the disciples, save John, abandoned him in the end. Only John stood at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother, Mary.

Over the centuries since these events occurred, millions of Christians have remembered them with anger. How could those who were supposed to be Jesus' dearest friends and two of his twelve disciples do this to him?

Do you remember me telling you about the day I went on a tour of the National Cathedral in Washington and they brought us up to the high altar, and pointed out the figures carved into the great chancel rail there? There were twelve places set out for the disciples, and you could go down and see carvings of them – Peter, James, John and the rest. Really beautiful carvings. So you walk down and look at each of them – one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven beautifully carved figures in wood – and then you come to the twelfth one and there's nothing there – just a plain block of wood uncarved. They chose not to show Judas, a way, I think, of condemning him for what he did to Jesus.

(Let me let you in on a little secret. That was a tour they gave to seminarians, but I'm told they don't point that fact out to general tours. I think they may have come to regret being so judgmental when they did that.)

Which leads me to where I want us to go with all of this. You and I and any one of us could be Judas or Peter, because, in fact, we are, aren't we? We, like them, have, at one time or another, betrayed or denied Jesus. Oh, I hope we haven't stood up and said we don't believe in him or don't follow him, but I'm afraid we betray him in other ways.

Don't we betray and deny him when we do things that aren't the least bit holy?

When we take his name in vain?

When we choose to care for ourselves first and most, and turn our backs on the ones he loved so dearly, the last, the lost and the least?

When we do not spend time with him in prayer or let our own busyness get in the way of worship or service?

Don't we deny his holiness and his power to change lives when we fail to tell others about him or invite them to come to church and learn about his love?

Or when we "bring him out on Sundays" and then live the rest of the week without a thought of him – is that not betrayal and denial?

Oh friends, we dare not point a finger at Judas and Peter without pointing fingers at ourselves, because, if we're honest, we know we're more like them than we should be. And this is the season to think on that. This season of Lent is a time

when we're called to take a honest and truthful look at ourselves and confess our shortcomings and failures.

And while that may seem and may be sobering, I have good news for you this morning. Because the story then didn't end because of betrayal and denial, and it doesn't end that way now either.

Then, the story ended with victory – death lost, and life won.

And it ended with mercy – sin forgiven, new life restored. Sadly, Judas never saw that, because in his despair, he took his own life. But Peter – oh, what happened to Peter!

After Jesus' death, Peter and the others went back to their old lives – and Peter's old life was as a fisherman. He and the others were fishing one night, and having absolutely no success, and were, rightly, discouraged. All of a sudden, the writer of John tells us that a man appeared on the shore, a man they didn't recognize, and he told them how to change what they were doing to catch some fish. Which they did, and which turned out to be tremendously successful – they caught so many fish the net couldn't contain them all.

And in that moment, Peter knew that man was Jesus – and so it was. What happened next changed Peter's life forever, because Jesus asked him, point blank, "Peter, do you love me?" Not once, not twice, but three times, giving Peter a chance to speak his love for him the same amount of times he had denied him. In that loving exchange, Jesus wiped away the past, and set Peter on the road to a new future. He was forgiven, and set free, and went from that place to set the world on fire for Jesus!

My friends, that was good news for Peter, and it is the Good News for us as well. No matter what we do, no matter how far we push Jesus away, no matter how we betray or deny him, he stands ready to forgive us and set us on our feet again on the pathway to new life. All we have to do is confess our wrongdoing, and ask for his forgiveness, and he will reach out his hand and offer it. The depth of mercy he offers is unfathomable, his love for us more than we deserve.

Thanks be to God for his love that never lets us go, his mercy that never ends, and his amazing grace poured out through his Son and our Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Amen.