

The Seventh Sunday after Easter: The Sunday after Ascension Day (Year B texts)

Eucharistic Readings:

Acts 1.15-26

Psalm 47

1John 5.19-15

John 17.11b-19

The Collect of the Day:

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus." Acts 1.15

Jesus said, "I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled." John 17.12b

Another said, "Judas come home, all is forgiven..." graffiti from a men's restroom in San Francisco

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

How do we read the bible? Is it all true? Every word? Every verse?

Often when I deliver a sermon from a transcript, as I am today, I begin as I just have done, by reading individual verses from the readings of the day. I do this because on any given Sunday there is so much for us to learn from the lectionary texts that there is no way we can digest all of the good news they contain; therefore this morning we focus on the verses concerning Judas. As we have just heard, Judas is named in two of the day's readings as a disciple who was *destined* to be lost, and in both cases Judas' destiny is declared a necessity; a necessity because Judas' betrayal of Jesus was an act perpetrated "so that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

It's unfortunate, but we don't know exactly *which* scriptures were fulfilled on betraying day. Neither Luke, the author of *The Book of Acts*, nor the author of *The Gospel According to John*, tell us *which* scriptures, or which *verses* of scripture, exactly, were fulfilled when Judas betrayed Jesus. Neither of them cites chapter and verse and therefore, because there is no clear scriptural reference, bible scholars must admit that they are not sure whether Luke and John are referring to the fulfillment of a particular passage of scripture or whether they are referring to the fulfillment of Holy Scripture in a more general sense.

And while this may seem a little picayune, wondering whether Luke and John are citing chapter and verse or are interpreting what they claim to be the fulfillment of scripture in a greater and more general sense, nothing could be further from the truth. How we interpret the Word of God in Holy Scripture and even more how we interpret the details, is of great importance. Important because how we interpret the Word of God as recorded in the bible determines how we view the neighbors we are commanded to love in this world and, perhaps even more important, how we

view ourselves. The difference between believing that Luke and John are talking about Judas' betrayal as the fulfillment of some specific passage of Holy Scripture somewhere versus whether or not they are referring to the fulfillment of Holy Scripture in a more general, or shall we say *archetypal* sense, is the difference between thinking that the Word of God in the bible is dead or alive; it is the difference between thinking that the story of Judas is over and done versus a story still being told.

Have you ever heard someone speak of the "proof-texting" of scripture? Proof texting is an allegorical method of scriptural interpretation that applies particular passages of scripture, or worse individual verses, to contemporary scenarios in order to prove some notion right; more often than not proof texting is employed to prove a person or persons behavior as biblically unwarranted, perverse, sinful, condemnable; contrary to God's Word. In other words, proof texting means that rather than reading the whole of any book in scripture and then trying to interpret what that whole means, we do the reverse. We imagine what we think to be true, believe or want to be true, about ourselves or God, and then we find a verse in scripture that verifies that belief. To use a rather common misconception we might say, for example, "The Old Testament God is an angry and vengeful God." We would then find a verse in scripture that would seem to support that claim and verify our proclamation; God knows (if we can assume that she's read the biography of her own wisdom) that we won't have to search long to quote chapter and verse in the Hebrew Scriptures in order to prove her wrath. Funny thing is – the bible – if we begin to compare accounts, is a very contrary story. For every instance in the Hebrew Scriptures where there is a verse about an angry and vengeful God, there is another verse describing God's *hesed* – God's loving-kindness – the ultimate and unrelenting forgiveness and compassion wrought by God!

To be sure, the stories about Judas in the bible are contrarian. There are several stories about Judas' betrayal and its outcome and each of them are different in one way or another. If we were using these varying stories in the bible in order to convict Judas in a court of law we'd have a hard time because none of the gospel stories about the betrayal are the same. Indeed, if we were in a court of law and were using these gospel stories as eye witness accounts to prove Judas' guilt it wouldn't take a defense attorney long to use the bible's contrary accounts to create a significant amount of reasonable doubt; if we are the jury I'm afraid we'll have to let Judas go free. So, as Pilate said and the gospel begs, what is [the] truth?

A critical reading of the bible, the kind of reading that leads us away from our tendency to use the bible as an allegory applicable to particular circumstances or choices – a source to proof text the guilt of others –and hence moves us into an understanding of the bible as a book which contains the living and eternal truth about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and us, I dare say, is exactly what both Luke and John hope that we come to understand as being the fulfillment of scripture in today's stories about Judas. The fulfillment of scripture is not one verse from the Old Testament being verified or over-ridden by one verse in the New, but rather the fulfillment of scripture is what happens when we begin to know who God is and what God is like and who we are and what we are like as we stand before God. If we begin to look at the story of Judas with a critical eye and consider the meaning of the story as a whole it won't take us long to discover a consistent truth in all of the accounts of Judas' betrayal of Jesus: Jesus was betrayed

and he was betrayed not by some stranger or some Pharisee or Sadducee or some angry Jewish mob but rather by one of his very own disciples.

True enough, the not so contrary truth in every one of the stories about Judas are not the verbs that describe how Jesus was betrayed or even what happened to Jesus' betrayer after the deed was done but rather by the *noun* that describes the betrayer. Jesus betrayal was betrayal by *disciple* – an inside job. God knows we can't proof-text our own truth out of this story if we tried. If we told this story today we'd have to use a more familiar noun to describe who Jesus' betrayer was – we'd be forced to proclaim that Jesus was not betrayed by a Jew or a Muslim or a black guy or a white girl or by someone named Judas or any other name, but by a *Christian*; the evil in the betrayal narrative comes from within Jesus' circle, not from without.

And here's another truth – an eternal truth. We don't read the Bible in order to possess the truth about God or others we read the bible so that the truth of God may *possess us*. If we read the whole bible through what we'll hear more than anything else is that God is good and that sometimes, most of the time in fact, the people God chooses to call God's own fall short. There's a painful reality that comes with that realization, with that kind of reading of the bible, but also a beautiful one.

If we read God's whole and holy book through we will read a story about a God who does nothing more often than forgive. And the truth in that... Could that be the *complete fulfillment of scripture*?

If Luke and John are correct and in the act of our betrayal somehow the scriptures are fulfilled I don't think that that means that the story of God's relationship with the world has reached its end. In fact I'm sure of that – the story of God's redemption, as well as our betrayals, is still being told. Another thing I'm sure of is that what we learn from the Judas narratives is that if we think the business of Christianity has more to do with someone else's getting it right than with our own – with someone else's betrayal or sin more so than our own – we might want to read these stories with a more critical eye, with an eye pointed to the fulfillment of scripture within our very selves... with an eye that is turned more inside than out. We might also realize that when it comes to the betrayal of God, God will do the choosing, God will do the judging, and hopefully God will continue to do what God does more than anything else in the bible, which is to forgive. And if we follow God's lead, if we become a truth driven Christian people, a people who, like their God, are known far more for their forgiveness than for their wrath – the world will know Christians by their love, by our love.

And having said all of this, I'll make a confession. The third quote that I read at the beginning of this sermon, the one that read, "Judas come home, All is forgiven," doesn't come from *The Book of Acts* or *The Gospel of John*, but rather from a book written about Judas. The author of that book doesn't cite scripture as his source for those words but rather graffiti written on the wall in a men's restroom in San Francisco. And while the original author of that graffiti didn't cite a biblical reference, *those words sure sound a lot like the fulfillment of scripture to me*. So come home, Judas, come home, IN CHRIST ALL IS FORGIVEN.

AMEN

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