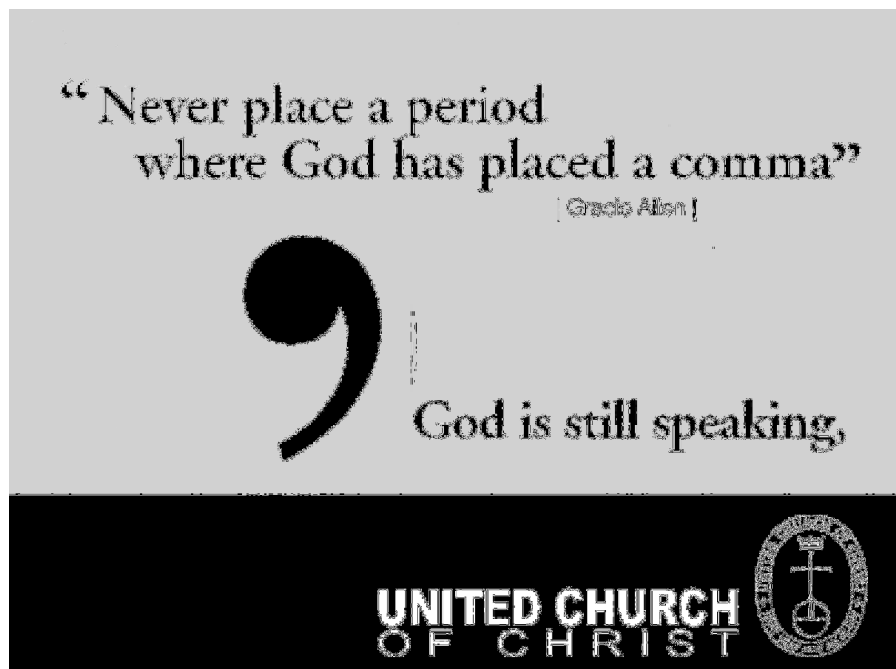


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SERMON

“Who Is He?”

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

March 18, 2008

“Who Is He?”
Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer
March 16, 2008

Scripture: Matthew 26:14-27

It was Palm Sunday but because of a sore throat, five-year-old Johnny stayed home from church with a sitter. When the family returned home, they were carrying several palm fronds. Johnny asked them what they were for.

“People held them over Jesus’ head as he walked by,” his father told him. “Wouldn’t you know it,” Johnny fumed, “the one Sunday I don’t go and Jesus shows up.”

It is Palm Sunday; although in the choosing of the scriptures for this Sunday it is also called Passion Sunday, the beginning of the end for Jesus. In our reading this morning, there are no palm branches waved and no cloaks strewn across the dusty road. It is the celebration time of the Jews as they recall their freedom from slavery in Egypt. Jesus has moved from the outside to the inside, Jerusalem, and while some are cheering and waving branches of joy and victory, some are whispering, “Who is he?” “Who is this Jesus?” and on the heels of that, who is this man named “Judas”? The website www.babycenter.com reports that new to the top 100 most popular names for baby boys are Adrian, Cody, Colton, and Jeremiah and rising star names are Brody, Jayden, Julian, Lucas, Peyton, Tristan, and Xavier. Nowhere on the “hot names for boys list” is Judas.

While the name Judas means “praise.” Judas Iscariot ranks as the most hated, the most despised character in the entire Bible.

Who is Judas? Where did he come from? What do we know about him? If you are going to hate and despise someone, it seems to me you should at least know why. I remember being in Sunday School classes where the Passion story was read and every time Judas’ name was spoken we were instructed to hiss and boo.

Who is he, Judas? This is the stuff good Bible study is made of. And before you roll back your eyes, pull down the shades, and slip of into la-la land, listen to some of this. It’s information you can use at cocktail parties, interesting facts you can slip into conversations when you run out of Eliot Spitzer jokes. (I am from New York State, so I can say that.)

In the historical and scholarly world, there are writings from prominent first century Jewish historians, two of which are Philo Judaeus and Flavius Jospheus. Judas is not mentioned by either of those historians. The next earliest writings: Paul, the Gospel of Thomas, Q, no mention of Judas and his dastardly deed. Only when we

get to the New Testament Gospels and the Book of Acts, all of which were written long after the events allegedly took place, do we learn of Judas.

Who is he? Mark, the oldest of the canonical gospels, tells us that Judas is appointed by Jesus as one of the original twelve apostles: Judas, mentioned last, who betrayed Jesus (in parenthesis). Matthew and Luke repeat Mark almost verbatim; however, the author of John adds that one of the twelve, Judas, is a devil. John also adds that he is a thief, regularly skimming from the common purse.

The plot thickens. As was predicted, Judas went to the chief priests and offered to identify Jesus. They accepted his offer and agreed to pay him thirty pieces of silver, which brings up another perplexing question. Why would the authorities pay to have someone pointed out to them whom they already knew? Jesus was well known throughout the land, especially in Jerusalem.

Judas identifies Jesus to the authorities by way of that infamous kiss, and that's the last we hear of Judas in the gospels of Mark, Luke and John. However, the author of Matthew doesn't let it drop there. Apparently Judas' conscience got the better of him because, according to Matthew, Judas made a sincere attempt to repent but was denied forgiveness. In a gesture of frustration, he flung the money onto the temple floor and went and hanged himself. Matthew goes on to say that the chief priests and the elders used the money to buy a piece of land. Because it was bought with blood money, the land became known as "The Field of Blood."

Had the Judas story ended with the betrayal followed by the suicide, everything might have been hunky-dory, but the writer of Acts couldn't leave well enough alone. We get another story. Judas didn't give the money back; he invested it in real estate. We also learn that Judas didn't commit suicide; his death was accidental. Because of the messiness of this accident, the property became known as (you guessed it) "The Field of Blood." So, did Judas commit suicide as the writer of Matthew claims, or was his death an accident as we are told in Acts?

But, wait, it gets even more confusing on Acts when Jesus appears to the disciples post-resurrection and there are 11 there, or 12. According to Acts, Judas neither committed suicide nor died by accident. In Acts 1:25 we are told that Judas "turned aside to go to his own place," whatever that means.

Then along comes the Gospel of Judas, one of the Lost Gospels discovered just two years ago. This reconstructed document from the 2nd century describes a very different role that Judas played. Judas was not a betrayer. He was a catalyst. Jesus instructed Judas alone. Jesus, in his human form, was in a spiritual prison. Judas thus served Christ by helping to release Christ's spirit from its physical constraints. The action of Judas allowed Jesus to do that which Jesus could not do directly. Judas is not to be despised. Judas is to be celebrated.

This rather turns our world upside-down, when everything you have been taught can suddenly be looked at in a new way. What do we do if we don't have Judas to hate anymore?

Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with the words: "Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people."

When I went to Israel and Palestine a year ago, I saw elementary school textbooks of Israeli children that taught that Palestinian children are stupid and dangerous and evil. Then I went to the Shalom community where Jews and Muslims and Christians were intentionally living together in community. I walked out into the playground and 100 children were playing, speaking each other's language, being kids. The problem came when they got to the eighth grade and they had to go out into the real world and they suddenly saw hate, barriers, and violence.

How far around the world do we have to go to see hate? I can go just a few blocks from my driveway or from this church. Sometimes I can almost see it even closer than that, in myself. I once went to a memorial service and did not know the person they were talking about. "He was kind. He was loving. He was generous." Who was this man? My experience was of bitterness and divisiveness, bigotry, and well, just wrong. What had I missed? What had I not seen? Not what was wrong with him, but what was wrong with me? New evidence turned my experience upside-down and my heart was changed.

Passion Sunday begins our Holy Week. I love this week, as draining and exhausting as this week can be. My greatest hope for the week is that we will try to hear the familiar stories as if we are hearing them for the first time. The Gospel stories are so powerful but perhaps have been so often repeated and too superficially used. "Judas betrayed Jesus, how despicable he is; therefore I will not betray Jesus." The question may not only be "Who is Judas, really?", but "Who am I, really?" Am I a catalyst for spiritual growth? Am I a divider or a healer? Do people sense from me hate, or maybe worse, that I am lukewarm, not hot or cold, just go along to get along, don't take a stand, keep everybody happy, don't rock the boat, baby?

Yesterday I was on EqualityArizona.org talk radio. The host Donna Rossi led a panel discussion on coming into Holy Week there are so many who feel alienated from church, especially in the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and transgender community. So, "would Jesus discriminate?" she asked. It took all four pastors about three seconds to say "No, our doors are open." The rest of the hour we tried to speak a voice that often gets shouted down. Jesus spoke of a new kind of power and kingdom: a realm of passion and compassion. And it got him killed. What will we say and do?

Does anyone watch basketball in Phoenix? In his book "Narratives of a Vulnerable God" author William Placher uses an illustration from the world of basketball. Professor Placher writes, "In basketball the players who are always asking, "How am I doing? Am I getting my share of the shots?" "Those are the ones," he says, "who

never reach their full potential. It is the players who lose themselves who find themselves. And it's that kind of self-forgetfulness that makes the best players." "Blessed are the meek," Jesus said, "for they shall inherit the earth." No, this is crazy. We know the mighty will inherit the earth.

You have heard it said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." What sort of madness is this against the threat of terrorists?

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or what you will drink." Who can live that way?

"For what will it profit you to gain the whole world but forfeit your life?" That is surely no way to get the economy moving again.

"Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant..." Forget it, we say, we're standing tall and we will be greater still.

When it was evening, Jesus took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" And Jesus replied, "You have said so."

Amen.