

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

Maundy Thursday

April 9, 2020

The Rev. Dr. John Judson

Matthew 26:17-30

He zipped right across the street. He was in motion and nothing was going to slow him down. He was about six or seven years old and cruising on his bike. Behind him were his dad and little sister in a stroller. As the boy rode across the street, I heard his father call out, “Did you slow down and look both ways before you crossed?” The immediate answer was, “Yes Dad.” Now I had been watching this whole thing, including the boy crossing the street without turning his head or his eyes one way or the other, meaning, no, he had not looked either way and had not slowed down. So why the lie? Perhaps because that’s what most of us do at one time or another when asked a question whose true answer would bust us for not doing what we were supposed to do. I often did this when my mother would ask me if I had cleaned my room. The immediate answer would be yes, then I would hurry to my room to actually clean up before she got there to check. In fact in some cultures it is considered impolite to tell an answer in the negative, even when the negative is the truth, such as, “Can you have this done by the end of the day?” and the answer will always be, “Yes” even if it is impossible.

So I have to say this is the excuse I always wanted to make for Judas, that when he, along with the rest of the disciples asked Jesus, “It’s not me is it,” he was simply doing what we all do. Yet the longer I have lived with this story, the less I want to offer him an excuse. In fact, I have come to believe that Judas, rather than simply replying as we all do, was mocking Jesus. That if we could hear what was going on inside Judas’ head, we would have heard something like this. “Jesus, I’ve got you now. You never brought in the kingdom. You never got rid of the Romans. You never made me rich, or famous or powerful. And so now I am getting the wealth I deserve, and you are getting the punishment you deserve. I’m glad you’re going down and I am glad to be part of it. So Jesus I’ve got you now.” And I think that Jesus knew this. I think Jesus understood that Judas had betrayed him and was still not surprised by Judas’ answer. So what does Jesus do? Does he confront Judas? Does he tell the others that Judas is the betrayer? No, he doesn’t. All he does is invite him to have dinner. All he does is share this last meal with the one who betrayed him.

This response should come as no surprise to us for two reasons. First it should not because the Passover meal was a commemoration of the initiating event of the Exodus; the freeing of God’s people from slavery. And for those who know the story, the people God freed from slavery. The people God fed with manna. The people to whom God miraculously offered water from a rock...they betrayed God. The first chance they got they created a golden calf that was to become their god. Yet, God did not abandon them. Instead God fed them, led them and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. Chances are while God was hurt by their betrayal, God was somehow not surprised. In the same way, Jesus knew that the betrayal was coming, and not only from Judas, but from all the disciples. They would all run away. They would all pretend they did not know him. Peter would in one of the great betrayals of history, deny Jesus three times. So Judas was not alone in his betrayal. They were all in on it. Yet Jesus still invited them to the table. Jesus still gave his life for them. Jesus still loved them in spite of what they were about to do.

My friends, this is one of the amazing things about Jesus and about this table. It is that Jesus invites all to come and feast. Jesus does not invite only those who are perfect or nearly so. Jesus does not invite only those who have never betrayed him by saying or doing something of which he would not approve. No, Jesus invites all of us. Jesus invites us to come regardless of what we have done or not done; regardless of our flaws or failings; regardless of our past, present, or future. Jesus invites us to this table where all are welcome and where all are invited to eat and drink, to be fed and refreshed. I once had one of my good friends not come to the table because she thought she was not worthy...and so I told her this is not how it works. It works like that first table, where all of those who were going to betray Jesus were welcomed to eat. And so in a few minutes I hope you will all come...come to the table where all eat.