March 27, 2013 – Wednesday of Holy Week

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**John 13:21-32**

At supper with his friends, Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples-- the one whom Jesus loved-- was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once."

Yesterday I happened to look down at my hand and I noticed that one of the little diamonds on my engagement ring was missing. It was only a little diamond, but I was pretty upset. Where there had been twelve little stones, there were now only eleven.

That must have been how Jesus felt that night in the upper room. But whereas I might have suspected that losing a diamond was a possibility, since I hadn't taken that ring off for nearly 26 years, Jesus KNEW that Judas was going to betray him. And whereas I knew that my little diamond could be replaced pretty easily, to Jesus, Judas' defection must have left an irreparable hole.

Yet, even knowing what he did, Jesus loved Judas to the last moment possible. Just before our Gospel passage today is the scene where Jesus washes his disciples feet. We have what could be a humorous exchange between Peter and Jesus – I imagine a sort of tug of war with Peter's sandal – but there is no mention of Jesus NOT washing Judas' feet, even though afterwards he does say that one among them isn't really clean. From what we know of the text, in that moment he treats Judas as humbly and as tenderly as any of the other disciples.

And at the supper that night, though the text doesn't specify, Judas must have been sitting pretty close to Jesus for him to hand him the morsel of bread. He might have even been right next to him, on the opposite side of where the beloved disciple was reclining. He might have been even closer than Peter, who was a ways down the table and had to have things relayed to him by the beloved disciple. Judas had to be near Jesus, in what would have been a position of honor and respect, and love.

From my many years in the theater, I tend to think of things in theatrical terms. I can see this scene, with the disciples in lower light all muttering and wondering who was the betrayer, and a narrow spot on Jesus and Judas as Judas makes his fateful choice to take the bread he is offered.

Because it WAS a choice. God doesn't move us around like puppets. Judas had a choice to take that bread and acknowledge to Jesus that he was the traitor. He had a choice to leave the party, to go to the authorities, and to lead them back to Jesus at the garden. Everything he did, he did of his own volition.

The text says Satan entered into him the moment he took the bread, but not before. However, there's no mention of some kind of demon possession, where Judas couldn't control what he was doing. It was more likely Satan using his more subtle tools of manipulating human pride, stubbornness, anger, and fear that drove Judas on and prevented him from turning back at any point.

Have you ever made a bad choice, then felt you couldn't change your mind and do the right thing? "Well, there's nothing I can do about it now," or "I have my pride and I'm not changing my mind," or "I don't care what other people think of me, I'm going to do what I want." Pride, stubbornness, anger, and fear are powerful motivators that can, however briefly, even eclipse love.

One commentary I read said that authentic love always risks betrayal. Jesus loved Judas. He chose him as a disciple, he washed his feet, and he shared food with him. More specifically, he shared BREAD with him. He shared his own body with Judas as an act of love. But authentic love, the love Jesus had for Judas and has for us, must allow choice. If God compelled us to love him, it wouldn't be real.

Interestingly, this passage contains the only mention of Satan in the entire Gospel of John. Normally when John is trying to make a point, will repeat a word or phrase over and over, so the fact that this is the only place he uses Satan could be taken to mean that he meant to emphasize the human agency in this betrayal, not the demonic. And Judas was only human. He made his choice, for whatever reason, to betray that perfect love, and never turned back.

New Testament scholar Neil Alexander, made an interesting point in his commentary on this passage. He said that Judas' betrayal didn't make that much of a difference – that Jesus was in enough hot water that he would have been dealt with by the authorities sooner or later.

Similarly, Peter's denial of Jesus didn't have any impact on the outcome of Jesus' trial. I'm not sure we can let Judas off that easily, but it does say something about betrayal. Even if Judas' betrayal didn't change things at all, it is still seen as monumental, as was Peter's. So, it's not the level or impact of the betrayal that makes it so bad, it's who and what was being betrayed.

When we are betraying perfect love, there's no range or gradient from slightly bad to really bad to downright evil. Are we not all Judas or Peter at one time or another? Perhaps we haven't betrayed someone to his death, but haven't we all turned on God or let him down at some point in our lives? It might be small things like being too busy to give God any of our time, or big betrayals like turning our back on God in anger. Or perhaps we simply choose to ignore Jesus' command to love God and love our neighbor, because it doesn't suit us.

It's all betraying God's perfect love, and it's all our choice to do or not.

But here's the good news. God can, and does, make good things come of our bad choices. With God's perfect love, comes God's perfect forgiveness.

I know I am only human. Over and over again, Jesus holds out the bread of life to me, and over and over again, I squander his gift. But I also know, through God's perfect love, that I am forgiven. Over and over again. And I know that anyone who turns to him in faith with true repentance is also forgiven. Over and over again.

It's tempting, and only natural at this time in Holy Week, to focus on betrayal. But before Judas' betrayal, before any of our betrayals was Jesus' perfect, true, and authentic love – that same love that he had for all of us when he went to the Cross for our salvation. And with that immeasurable love comes God's perfect, true, and authentic forgiveness.