

Jesus, Judas and The Killer God

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Where there is justice without compassion, there will be anger, violence, and murder. A thirst for justice without an instinct for compassion produces killers. Sometimes they are simply believers in a Killer God. Sometimes they are assistant killers of a Killer God.

—from *The Birth of Christianity*, by John Dominic Crossan

...re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul... —Walt Whitman

Ancient Witness: Matthew 26:47-56

About 20 years ago I decided that I wouldn't participate in Good Friday observances for awhile. I concluded that it's impossible to mark the stations of the cross without contributing to the underlying message that the suffering and death of Jesus was actually a good thing, that it had to happen, that the crucifixion of Jesus happened in order for God to love the world.

I am one of those Jesus-followers who believes that it *didn't* have to happen, one who doesn't want to glorify the suffering and gore. There is nothing redemptive about violence. What is redemptive is the Divine Compassion that we see in the life of Jesus and many others. It seems to me that Jesus didn't die *for* our sins, but he died *because* of human sin. Jesus was killed for standing up to the empire, not to atone for the sins of humanity. Oppression, violence and abuse happen, of course, but they don't *have to*. And they certainly are not "good." I cannot worship a god who calls for a sacrifice and violent death. Rather, I worship the God we seen in Jesus' teachings. Richard Rohr says, "Your image of God creates you." And we can see through history how a Killer God has produced killers.

So, today I want to talk about Jesus, Judas and the Killer God. In the Bible, is there anyone more reviled than Judas? Of all the characters in the scriptures, is there any more loathsome than he? The evil of Pilate, of Herod and of the Temple elite is bad, yes. But it is not surprising. We would expect it from them. But we wouldn't expect such treachery from someone so close, someone on the same side, someone so trusted. And so, to many, this figure of Judas is the most reprehensible of all.

And his act of betrayal was transformed into *the* act of betrayal. It became the incarnation of betrayal itself. It was idealized and embellished.

If in the ancient Mediterranean world, to betray after a kiss was shameful, to betray with a kiss was infamous. (John Dominic Crossan)

There are three different accounts of Judas' death—each to demonstrate how evil and shameful he was. In Matthew (27:5) he hanged himself as traitors in the Old Testament did. (See 2 Samuel 17:23) In Acts, he "burst open in the middle, and all his bowels gushed out (16:12).

Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, wrote about Judas becoming monstrously bloated and his “belly burst asunder and his bowels were scattered” and, as the story goes, for more than a century later nobody could pass without holding their nose! So the idea is that he was rotten to the core.

Most of the Judas story is legend and not historical fact, reflecting the perspective of the early communities and writers.

First, Judas seems to have an airtight alibi. The three synoptic gospel accounts have him present all during the Last Supper. They all go to the Mount of Olives, and then suddenly Judas shows up with these armed troops. It doesn't seem physically possible for Judas to do it.

Furthermore, if the betrayal was suspected, why didn't Jesus and the others change their hiding place?

And then there's the question of the motive. If it was about money and greed, Judas would have just absconded with the common purse, since he was appointed treasurer of Jesus' followers. The gospels try to resolve this simply by saying that the devil entered Judas.

And then there is the curious reaction of the other disciples at the Last Supper to Jesus' declaration that “one of you will betray me.”

In John's version, the only reaction is Peter's desire to know who it will be. After his curiosity is satisfied with Jesus identifying the traitor, nothing happens. It seems that the disciples accept the announcement with indifference. Evidently they go back to their eating and drinking. In any event, none of them do anything to prevent the betrayal of Jesus and the threat of death, making them all accomplices.

In Luke's version, they occupy themselves with an argument of who is the greatest. Later that night they all continue to fall asleep even though Jesus asks them to stay up and watch with him. All this shows how unconcerned they are.

And then, they don't even try to rescue him. Instead of acknowledging Jesus, Peter denies him, all of the rest also flee and do not even witness his dying, even from a distance. Jesus, in a sense, is betrayed by them all. And he dies utterly alone.

What is going on?

John Dominic Crossan says that the stories about his role got modified in order for that early community to make sense out of what happened. The stories evolved from events that happened into events that *had* to happen, that were *meant to be*. And so we have in John, the latest version and most evolved, Jesus himself actually telling Judas to commit his treachery. Because the events of Jesus' death were so horrible, the communities were anxious to show that they were *destined to occur*. In John, Jesus is in complete control of the events.

And so the authors tell the story about this tragic event as if it were actually not a bad thing, but really part of God's plan! So in Luke it says, “The Son of Man goes as it has been determined.” (Luke 22:22) And he tells the story with Jesus foretelling the events as if they were ordained to happen.

They also tell the story in a way to show that the Hebrew Scriptures had predicted this all along. For example, Psalm 41 read:

*Even my bosom friend in whom
I trusted, who ate of my bread,
has lifted his heel against me. (41:3)*

And so in John's version he writes,

But it is to fulfill the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me."

And in Matthew when Jesus is arrested, he says to Judas, "my friend." (The only one Jesus calls his friend.)

The scene of the 30 pieces of silver that Judas flings into the Temple and used to purchase the potter's field is a re-telling of the Old Testament. "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah," writes Matthew.

Only Matthew confuses Zechariah for Jeremiah (32:6-9). Zechariah 11:12-13 reads,

*And they weighed out as my wages 30 shekels of silver... So I took the 30 shekels of silver
and cast them into the treasury in the house of the Lord.*

But Matthew makes a second mistake with the 30 pieces of silver that the high priests "weighed out to him." (Mt 26:16). In Jesus' day these were gold and silver denarii, but no coin known as "pieces of silver." These had gone out of circulation about 300 years before. Also problematic is the statement that it was "weighed out." This was customary in Zechariah's time, but by Jesus' day had long been replaced by minted coins. And so Matthew simply retells Zechariah's story, which he thought was Jeremiah's.

The betrayal of Judas was turned into something that *was meant to be, that had to be.*

About 15 years ago, Judas was in the news when a team of scholars released a translation of the "Gospel of Judas," never before seen until then. The translation is from a very old copy, a codex from the end of the third century after the Common Era. We haven't seen it before because the church leaders, early on, burned and destroyed other copies, declaring the Gospel of Judas to be heresy.

And in this text, we see the continuation of this evolution of Judas from the evil betrayer to the close friend of Jesus, who tells Judas that if he sells him out to the authorities then he will "exceed" the other disciples by doing so.

In our reading, fighting is the first inclination of the disciples. The ear of the slave is cut off, and Jesus says, "No!" "No" to violence as the method of his revolution. "No" to a violent military solution. For Jesus, non-violent love was the method and the goal. Non-violent resistance and confrontation was his way.

And where we succumb to violence, to force, to war, we, too, betray Jesus.

The disciples and the church seem to continually misunderstand Jesus. And so the church, in order to make sense of the death of Jesus, turns Judas into “the hand of God.” They explained that Jesus’ torture and death “had to happen” in order to “save us from sin.” So Judas was merely acting as an “instrument of God’s plan.”

Why did Jesus die? My view is not that God wanted Jesus dead. What kind of god would require the death of an innocent person to be “satisfied?” Rather, Jesus was killed by those religious and political leaders, and it was condoned by the disappointed masses, who, like Judas, wanted a violent liberation from the Roman occupying regime.

And these public executions were about terror and intimidation. Crucifixion was an instrument of social control. The crosses—and there were many, many crosses, not just Jesus—sent a message: “Watch out. You could be next.”

The cross, then, is a symbol of integrity and courage. Jesus would not be intimidated. He would not back down from his message. He died because he was convinced that each person was precious in God’s eyes. He knew that they were already loved, saved and treasured. Jesus wanted this to be realized “on earth as it is in heaven.”

And what of Judas? Who was the real Judas? There’s been quite a bit written that he wasn’t a traitor to the cause, but in fact, was a *true believer*, if ever there was one. I suspect that Judas was exasperated and impatient with Jesus. He wanted the kingdom of God; he wanted justice to roll down; he wanted an end to oppression; and he wanted it NOW.

Many believe that Judas was probably a member of the Zealot sect, a political/military/religious group, convinced that military power and violent insurgency were the solution. They saw Herod as a threat to the Kingdom of God. Herod, after all, violently repressed Judea as an agent of Rome. The last straw was when he placed a large golden eagle over the great gate of the Temple. Two rabbis and their 40 students pulled it down, and the entire group was captured and cruelly put to death by fire by Herod.

Among these Zealots was an even more intense group called in Latin, “the Sicarii.” It means “the dagger-men.” They were a cadre of assassins who carried daggers under their robes, intent on driving the Roman occupiers out of Judea.

Some scholars think that the word “Iscaiot” is a derivative of the word “sicarius” or “dagger-man.” Judas the dagger-man.

Why would Judas cooperate with the Romans and Herod? Maybe he lost his patience with Jesus, becoming disappointed and fed up. Maybe he thought that if this once-popular leader were martyred, it would spark a violent uprising by the people, and he was trying to incite a bloody revolution.

In any case, Judas and the crowds started out on Jesus’ side. They were on the right side, the side of justice, and not really motivated by greed. They wanted the right things, to end oppression and exclusion. They were against tyranny, as we all should be. They were for social justice, as we all should be. They had all the right motives, and yet, they were disappointed and disillusioned by

Jesus' method. They were hawks; Jesus was a dove. They started out cheering for Jesus, waving the palm branches, but then called for his crucifixion.

And so Judas, it seems to me, is not completely evil, as he has been made out to be, with selfish and bad motives. But neither is he the instrument of God, doing something that had to happen anyway.

So perhaps we can look into our hearts that even the best and well intentioned worship can be offered at the altar of violence. And seeing the betrayal of our souls we can begin truly to understand God's love that comes without condition.

You know, this time of year, tradition is very strong. And tradition is a mixed bag. I've always had a love/hate thing with religious tradition. I suspect I'm not the only one. It seems to me that we need to choose which voices within tradition we will listen to, and which we will not. Because there is no one, single consistent voice. We have to decide. We have to choose.

These *competing voices* exist within all traditions, it seems to me, between violence and non-violence, justice and complicit silence, inclusion and exclusion. And we need to take some responsibility for the fact that religious tradition has justified violence and bloodshed and has caused tremendous damage, and we need to transform it.

And so we can choose between a God who liberates with violence, with an angel of death "passing over" the people of Israel and slaughtering the firstborn babies of Egypt. Really? And this God who would obliterate virtually the entire human race with a flood. This ain't a children's story, my friends.

Or, on the other hand, the vision of the prophet where the lion lays down with the lamb, where spears are transformed to pruning hooks, where people will study war no more, and where *all* people shall feast together on the Holy Mountain.

There is the voice speaking of a God who needs a human sacrifice—the torture and execution of a person—in order to love and save the world.

Or a God reflected in the gentle-hearted, border-crossing, wall-demolishing, enemy-loving Jesus, who refused to make the proscribed divisions and distinctions. We can choose. We must choose.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version. Bracketed text was omitted from the spoken sermon due to time constraint.)