

Series: The Words of Jesus in Intimate Conversation

Today: A Question Worth Asking—Judas and Jesus

Text: Matthew 26: 14-25

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

I am a late evening television watcher so I don't know a lot about the popular shows. If it is on before 10:00 p.m., I probably haven't seen it. However, the other evening a program caught my attention because of its title. The program is *The Listener*, and the reason I was interested was that the title reminded me of a book by the same name which was given to me by my pastor over 40 years ago. In fact, it is still on my shelf, and I just discovered it is selling on Amazon.com for about ten times the price on the dust jacket, but I would not sell it because it was a pivotal book in my journey of faith.

The program and the book have only one thing in common. Both of them deal with a man who is able to hear the thoughts of others before they speak them. The program is about a clairvoyant who hears the thoughts of others before they speak them and then helps the people to fulfill their dreams. The book is about a place where people go to share the deepest secrets of their hearts.

In the book 15 people make their way to a small building where they unburden themselves before a curtained alcove of things which have troubled them for years. There is a brass plate near the curtains in the alcove which reads: *"If you wish to see the man who has listened to you, touch the button above. You will see his face. He will be glad if you thank him, but it is not necessary."* When each of the people touches the button, they realize that the person who has been listening to them fully understands their fears, their doubts, their pain, and their

suffering before they spoke the first word just like the television program. However, this listener is one whom we all know. Behind the curtains is a portrait of Jesus.

The book is by Taylor Caldwell, and while she would never claim to be a therapist, she has been able to grasp some of the essential elements in the counseling process. The goal of any good therapist is to help a person get to the root of their problem and give them the tools to do something about it. In her portrayal of these 15 different cases there is a common thread. Each of the people shared what they believed was the problem that they were facing, but through the process of having someone listen to them, they discovered that the initial complaint is only a part of the entire problem they were facing in their lives. So it was with each of these troubled lives. Once they were able to get at the root of their discomfort in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, they were able to realize the steps they needed to take in order to resolve their problem.

This morning I want to submit to you that all of the disciples were troubled in some way on that first Maundy Thursday evening. Jesus had asked that they share the Passover supper. If you read the text carefully, you will see that he is the one who had made the preparations. He had arranged for a room. He provided the food which they were to prepare. He knew that this would be his final meal with them; the Jewish night which is different from any other night for it tells the story which defines Judaism to this day; the story of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of their journey to the Promised Land.

While they were eating, Jesus said to all of them: *“Truly I tell you that one of you will betray me.”* And one by one all of them responded, *“Surely not I, Lord?”*

If we listen to their response, perhaps their question can be our question, too. It is a question which searches the soul. It can help us to take stock of our lives and chart a new

direction. Our text this morning demonstrates this in two different ways: 1) Healthy soul searching creates community. 2) Failure to search our souls leaves us isolated.

HEALTHY SOUL SEARCHING

Did you notice that when Jesus made the statement that one of the twelve disciples would betray him, all twelve of the disciples asked the question: “*Surely not I, Lord?*” It appears to have been a question that was on the mind of the entire community of disciples, but they hadn’t shared it with each other. Perhaps Peter was already wondering if he could really follow Jesus if the going got really tough. Perhaps James and John already knew that they would run out of steam when Jesus asked them to pray with him. Healthy soul searching allows us to be honest with each other in the presence of God, and in our honesty with one another we find a sense of genuine community. The thing we have always said about the church is that we never been intended as a hotel for saints. Instead we are a hospital for sinners who need each other to remind us that we are not perfect, but we are forgiven.

Don and I attended a challenging workshop on Monday about the future of the main line church in a postmodern world. The workshop leader reminded us of a series of sermons entitled *Deliverance to the Captives* which the 20th Century Theologian, Karl Barth preached when he filled in for a friend who was on vacation as a prison chaplain. In one of those sermons Barth spoke to the prisoners and reminded them that the “*story of Good Friday is the story of three criminals on a cross; one good, two bad, one of whom became good. If we are to call ourselves a church we must be willing to show not just our good people, but our bad people. Jesus died in community with bad people.*”

A colleague submitted a personal story about how taking care of his children one evening helped him understand the community of the redeemed. He said it was one of those evenings

when everything went wrong. The kids were cranky while he was making dinner, so he gave them some hot chocolate to tide them over. Timothy, who is five, decided to throw his marshmallows at his little sister, knocking her hot chocolate all over her.

As she began screaming, the phone rang (and I foolishly answered it) *and* the doorbell rang (and I foolishly answered it—with the phone on my ear and a screaming kid in the background). He then returned to the kitchen and hollered at Timothy, and promptly had two crying kids.

As dinner began to burn, he deposited his daughter in the bath, slammed the door in the face of the five-year-old, and loudly announced that he was so angry he might do anything, so he declared he was putting himself in timeout.

Everything changed about ten minutes later when he caught sight of a yellow piece of construction paper sliding under the door. In the unsteady hand of a kindergartener was scrawled a message of grace that pierced his heart and turned him around: "From Timothy. To Dad. I still love you even when you're angry."

Healthy soul searching leads us deeper into a community of faith where we don't have to be perfect with each other but can honestly confess our sins publically to one another and seek each other's help in changing our attitudes and our behavior.

FAILURE TO SEARCH OUR SOULS

Eleven of the disciples found a sense of community in their willingness to search their souls and share their questions with one another: *Is it I, Lord?* However, there was one among the twelve who chose not to search his soul in the context of community. Judas had kept his plan to himself. He hadn't shared it with anyone.

Tradition has it that Judas was a Zealot. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the chosen one of God, but his political beliefs trumped his personal experience. He believed the Messiah was coming to start a revolution that would lead to the overthrow of Rome, driving them out of the Promised Land, and the establishing of the Kingdom of God on the earth with its capital in Jerusalem. He kept all of that to himself, and he conspired with the Romans thinking he would force the hand of Jesus to be the Messiah he believed in.

When we fail to search our souls in the context of community, we deceive ourselves. This is why we include a prayer of confession every Sunday at the Traditional Service. It is why we offer Stephen Ministry and Healing Prayer. It is to break down the isolation so we don't create our own reality and make ourselves and our society sick.

There is a saying in psychology that our secrets make us sick. We have seen that this week with the tragic shootings in a health club outside Pittsburgh. The shooter told his story on the internet, but apparently no one read it or no one took it seriously enough to notify authorities. He was a sick man, but his sickness shows us what happens when we are isolated and alone never allowing another human being to come close enough to ask the question about what God might will for our lives. Like Judas, his mind was made up. He acted on his own, believing it was the will of God, without ever checking with the community to discern the will of God.

Elie Wiesel, the famous novelist, tells the story of what happened to his hometown during WWII. In 1944 all the Jews of Sighet were rounded up and deported to concentration camps. Many of them died, but he survived, and twenty years later he returned to see his hometown again. What he found was that the current residents of Sighet had erased the Jews from their memory. Of that experience he writes, *"I was not angry at the people of Sighet for having driven out their neighbors of yesterday, nor for having denied them. If I was angry at all it was*

for having forgotten them. So quickly, so completely, the Jews of Sighet have not only been driven out of town, but out of time, as well."

Of this experience Henri Nouwen wrote: *"This story suggests that to forget our sins, to brush them aside lightly, to hide them from public view, may be even greater sin than to commit them. Why? Because that which is forgotten cannot be healed, and that which cannot be healed easily becomes a cause of greater evil. An Auschwitz that is forgotten causes a Hiroshima, and a forgotten Hiroshima can cause the destruction of our world. By cutting off our past, we paralyze our future; forgetting the evil behind us, we evoke the evil in front of us."*

How might the story have been different if Judas had come clean and told the disciples what he had done? Yet we know what Judas intended for evil, God used for good.

CONCLUSION

Is it I, Lord? Surely it is a question worth asking for each of us. Is it I who betrays you when I place my personal desires over the needs of others? Is it I who betrays you when I refuse to share what you have given me with others who have so much less? Is it I who betrays you when I curse the darkness I see around me rather than bothering to bring light to this world in which we live? Is it I who betrays you when I get so wrapped up in my own needs that I forget the needs of others?

For each of us the question will have different nuances as we examine our consciences and find those places in our lives which have yet to be converted to the will of God. Yet if we fail to ask the question, we miss the opportunity for community, and we remain isolated in our sin.

Is it I, Lord? Surely, it is a question worth asking.