

# The Judas Gene

March 11, 2007

**Bible Passage:** Matthew 26 (*The Message*)

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. Lent is the one holiday on the Christian calendar most of us aren't real sure about. Christmas and Easter are easy, but Lent? Many folks know Lent because we give up something...like chocolate. As United Methodists we don't really make a big deal out of Lent. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday—I vividly remember when I was in college and some of my Catholic friends had been to an Ash Wednesday service. I saw one of them and said, oh my gosh, are you okay (he had the ash mark on his forehead)?

Well, Lent is the 40 days leading up to Easter. "*Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock.*" We observe Lent to connect ourselves with Jesus as he withdrew into the wilderness for forty days in preparation for his brief ministry.

The last two weeks Linda has explored the life and ministry of Jesus. Last week in talking about the gathering of The Disciples, Linda shared with us the time in Jesus' life just after he had emerged from this 40-day wilderness experience to begin his ministry. You'll recall that those that followed Jesus in his ministry, The Disciples, seemingly dropped everything they were doing on the spot to follow Jesus.

In Mathew, Chapter 10, verses 1-4 we read,

*He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.*

*These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.*

If in this season of Lent we really intend to be faithful about self-reflection and soul searching we have to wrestle with the story of that last Disciple, Judas...the one who betrayed Jesus with a kiss. And ask ourselves is there any Judas is us.

In Matthew, Chapter 26 we find that story of the ultimate act of betrayal—Judas kisses Jesus on the cheek and reveals to the mob sent by the chief priests that this is the one, the troublemaker—and with that kiss, betrays his former teacher and friend. Why? It's almost unthinkable...but the fact of the matter is, without that act of betrayal, we would not had the ultimate act of

forgiveness and redemption. So these two seemingly antithetical positions—betrayal and forgiveness were inextricably linked for Judas and Jesus, and I believe for us still today.

## Original Garden Video

*It was a really sad time, when I think back on it all. One of the saddest experiences of my life. There I stood, looking at the dead body of my one true lifelong friend -- a man who had stood by me when I had some real problems -- when my little boy got so sick and died, when my husband got into trouble -- there was my friend with his kind, gentle words and his easy smile, always assuring me that I would be ok.*

*Too bad I couldn't tell him that -- it's not going to be ok -- cause he's dead!! ...I looked at his body that day -- let's see, 6, maybe 7 years ago now, but just as fresh in my mind, in my heart, as though it all happened yesterday....*

*My neighbor had come by the house and told me to get ready for a real bad sight. She waited while I finished eating and then walked with me out to the field where he lay...broken...I looked down at my dear friend, lying there, and I finally said what I had been wanting to ask him for a long, long time, but I was just too chicken to do it -- Judas...Judas Iscariot -- how did you get yourself into this mess?*

I'll never forget the look on my friend Stephen's face when it became clear to him that I was going to betray him. I grew up in Paducah, Kentucky, a small town in the western part of the state. I ran around with a group of guys—Stephen, Gil, Robert, Alan, George and Zeb. We were inseparable—we did everything together—games of baseball or football, sleepovers, you name it. But, as is often the case with friends, you kind of get close to one person in particular that you call your best friend. That was the case with Stephen and me.

Our parents had been life-long friends we actually met when we were two years old. He was the best man in my wedding—his father officiated our wedding. I was the best man in his wedding. He and his wife Carolyn are Annie's God-parents—suffice to say were and have remained close friends.

However, in the fall of 1978 our friendship came to a pretty serious test. That was our freshman year in high school—a year that many young men begin to mature physically. That summer I grew several inches and my voice lowered. When I started school that fall my teachers didn't recognize me. Back in the day I was kind of a BMOC—I played sports, I was on the student council...all of the *seemingly* important stuff. But, there was a problem...there was another BMOC too, our friend Gil. Gil had it all—looks, athletic ability, smarts. Even though we were friends there was a sort of competition between the two of us to be in control of our group of friends. And for our friends...this made it tough.

We both demanded loyalty leaving all of them in a tough spot—who should they follow? It all came to boiling point on Halloween night.

### **Original Garden Video**

*You know, back when Jesus first came around, there was some excitement and some real hesitance. Now Judas got all caught up in being part of the group of apostles that followed Jesus and thought he was really going to change things...He loved Jesus! He listened to every word Jesus said, and he loved those stories that Jesus was always telling. Judas would sometimes tell me some of those stories, and actually I was around to hear a few of those stories from Jesus himself. There weren't just men who followed Jesus, you know. Well anyway, Judas was smart. He was careful in his thinking and in his talking. He was the kind to stay up late and think things through. He never rushed into anything. Maybe that's one of the reasons I have a hard time understanding exactly how it all changed for Judas... I just wish it had all stayed happy and exciting for my friend Judas.*

Fifteen-year-old boys with hormones popping can do some pretty stupid things. Most of us were frustrated because we didn't have girl friends, so instead we usually got into mischief. On this one night we had concocted this idea to do a Halloween version of ding-dong ditch. You remember that one? The one where you ring the doorbell, run across the street to hide, and watch as the person comes to the door befuddled. Well, we cooked up a special version of that little activity that I'm a little ashamed to share. We decided that what we would do is take the pumpkins that were on the front porch, smash them, *then* ring the doorbell. I know, I know...little geniuses, right?!

We were well into our evening of fun when Gil came up with an even more sinister plot. He spread a plan around to all of us except Stephen that at the next house, we would turn Stephen over.

That is to say, after we smashed the pumpkin and rang the doorbell, we would drag Stephen up to the front door and tell the owner of the house that we caught this kid smashing his pumpkin and make Stephen apologize. This brought things to a head. I had always been Stephen's, well...kind of protector. He had always been a really small kid, and I...well I, never had that problem...I came out big and kept growing. Stephen and I were Mutt and Jeff, bosom buddies, but that night the stakes were as high as they get for teenage friendships. Gil grabbed Stephen and let his plan be known to all. Stephen looked at me in sheer terror his mouth saying nothing, but his eyes screaming...do something!

I quickly weighed the options and made a decision that I regret to this very day. I had a choice...to intervene—to do the right thing and support my friend, or to turn him over to the popular kids who would take advantage of

him and humiliate him. In order to play it safe and be part of the *in* crowd, I betrayed my best friend. I could not bring myself to actually participate, but my deed had been done when I stepped aside and let the act happen. I stood back and hung my head in shame as I watched my best friend be humiliated.

### **Original Garden Video**

*I don't recall the exact day, but I do remember it was a warm afternoon when I overheard Judas talking to some men that I didn't recognize. I heard Judas raise his voice...which was pretty rare.... Judas was so upset. I heard him say:*

*"I don't think he IS the Messiah...I just don't see it in his actions. He should act more like a great Messiah. He doesn't."*

*Thinking back on it now, the next few weeks after that afternoon make more sense. First of all was the Passover Meal...the time we all sat and ate with Jesus for the last time. Now that was quite a time. And, as you know it all ended badly for Judas. But let me tell you, it was something to live through. When I got there Jesus was doing the oddest thing. He was washing the feet of the disciples. That really made Judas mad. I guess Judas thought that Jesus shouldn't be doing such a thing, because Judas leaned over to me and whispered, "This act is beneath a great Messiah." I thought it was a little odd, but then lots of things Jesus did were not the usual things.*

I don't know how long my friend Stephen carried that scar. Being awkward teenage boys, we never found a way to deal directly with the emotion of that night. As days and weeks passed, we just kind of forgot about it, or at least Stephen did, or appeared to anyway.

Almost 25 years had passed since that ugly night in Paducah. My family had taken a vacation to Florida and we were driving back through Nashville, Tennessee where my friend Stephen and his family lived. For whatever reason the guilt I felt over that night so long ago broke open during that visit. I looked my friend in the eye and said I'm sorry about that pumpkin business when we were kids. "What?" Look man, I never told you I was sorry about not helping you out that night. "You gotta be kidding, I forgot about that a long time ago." Yeah, well I didn't. It still haunts me. Can you ever forgive me? "Ever...dude, I forgave you a long, long time ago." The problem is, I had not forgiven myself. For all this time I only wish I could have been the kind of friend for him he had always been for me.

Betrayal and forgiveness is the heart of our story with Judas and Jesus. Judas' act of betrayal put Jesus on a course toward Good Friday...the darkest hour of our spiritual existence. But, Jesus readily forgave then, and continues to forgive now. It is through this forgiveness that we receive the light of new life. It is a gift free to us all if we are willing to receive it.

## Original Garden Video

*After Jesus was finished washing everyone's feet, he made an announcement that got everyone all riled up. Jesus said that one of the disciples was going to betray him. I glanced over at Judas, but I couldn't catch his eye. He was staring at Jesus, like everyone else in the room. Finally, somebody blurted out, "Well, is it me?" And then others joined in asking the same thing. Finally, Judas, asked, "It's not me, is it, teacher?" And I tell you I was never more stunned in all of my life when Jesus said, "Yes, it is you." No one spoke. No one moved. Then Jesus picked up a piece of bread and started talking, while my dear friend, dear sweet Judas got up and silently walked out of the room....and that was the last time I saw Judas alive. I don't guess anyone will ever know the real story of what happened. There was a lot of talk, of course. People said things that I didn't want to hear -- that Judas had actually planned to betray Jesus. That Judas needed the money. But they also said some good things about Judas. That after he betrayed Jesus, and Jesus got arrested that Judas felt awful about it and he even gave them the money back and said he was wrong to do it. Of course, Judas was never around for me to talk to at that time and I never got to hear his side of it. I just know that he was a good man, and he must have gotten all mixed up, cause I know he was sorry. Why else would he go and hang himself? I hope somehow there is forgiveness for Judas...I hope somehow Judas can forgive me, cause I should have seen this coming. I should have done something to stop him, or to help him. I should have been a better friend to Judas....like he was to me.*

In 1983 Pope John Paul II visited a young man in prison who had tried to assassinate him two short years before. Time magazine's Lance Morrow wrote an article about that visit called *I spoke as a Brother*, and said this, "*Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control...to be locked into a sequence of act and response, of outrage and revenge, tit for tat, escalating always. The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. It extracts the forgiver from someone else's nightmare.*"