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Maundy Thursday

April 5, 2020

An Unforgiveable Sin?

From the Gospel according to John. “When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified’” Lest we forget, Judas was present at Jesus’ last meal with his friends. What was he thinking and experiencing at that meal?

Peter Rollins invites us to hazard a guess.¹ Imagine that you are Judas, he says, and that you are gathered with Jesus and the rest of his friends. As the evening darkens, Jesus bids the group gather round the table. They quiet down and look at him intently.

“My friends,” Jesus says, “take this bread, for it is my very body, broken for you.” Neither you nor the others know quite what Jesus means, but you can tell he is serious. Then he carefully pours wine into each one’s cup. “Take this wine and drink of it, for it is my very blood shed for you.” A chill descends on the gathering, as Jesus says, “As you do this, remember me.” Most of Jesus’ friends slowly begin to eat the bread and drink the wine, but you can’t lift your hand. His words have pierced your heart.

Your hesitation hasn’t escaped Jesus’ notice. He comes over and looks into your eyes. As he gazes at you, you see the loneliness and the pain, the nails and the blood. You hear the jeers of the soldiers and the passersby. You know that he will slowly and painfully suffocate to death on the cross. You don’t want to see what you see, though anyone who dared to look in Jesus’ eyes would see it. You want to escape, but Jesus looks at you and smiles compassionately. He embraces you. He seems to already know the painful guilt and deep regret that you will feel. Then he releases you and

¹ *The Orthodox Heretic: And Other Impossible Tales* (Paraclete, 2009), quoted in *Synthesis*, April 5, 2012.

offers you the cup. “Dear friend,” he says, “take this cup and drink it all. It is truly my blood, and it is shed for you.” You are profoundly shaken and uncomfortable as Jesus finally moves away from you. You fumble in your pocket, feeling the heavy pieces of silver lying there. Then you slowly get up and slip out.

We may not identify so closely with Judas, but he is an integral part of this story. We don’t talk much about him, perhaps because for us who try so hard to return to Jesus a tiny fraction of his love for us, Jesus’ betrayer is a puzzle for us. Perhaps he was a puzzle for the early church too. Although the name “Judas” is virtually a curse word for us, Judas or Judah is a name of which one could have been proud. In the ancient world the name Judas was borne by a descendant of the tribe of Judah, one of the twelve tribes descended from the patriarch Jacob, and the tribe of King David. Judas here was surnamed Iscariot, suggesting that he came from Kerioth in Judea. He was most likely the only Judean amongst all the Galileans, whom Jesus called first. As treasurer of the band of disciples, he was probably skilled with money. He might also have had good political connections, especially among those who opposed Rome’s rule.

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Did he feel like too much of an outsider among the northerners? Did he trust too much in his business acumen and political skills? Did he hope that Jesus’ arrest would be the flash point that would finally ignite rebellion against the Romans? Despite scholars’ best efforts, the puzzle remains.

John’s account of that fateful night tells us that, after Judas left, Jesus began to speak again, giving his friends the “new” commandment, from which this day takes its name. But we are still left with questions. Frederick Niedner asks whether we ever wonder, on hearing Jesus’ new commandment, on hearing Jesus tell the disciples how to love each other, if any of them went out into the night looking for Judas. Did they wonder where he had gone? Did any of them want to extend love to him? “Did

anyone fear for him, miss him, or try, even after he brought soldiers to Gethsemane, to bring Judas back to talk him out of his shame, his anger, his rapidly deepening hell?"² Did anyone try to keep him from snuffing out his proud life, as Jesus' own life was ebbing away?

Niedner guesses that no one found him. Perhaps no one has found him to this day. Perhaps "[h]e is still out there ... wandering somewhere in the night, forsaken by every generation of disciples since that ancient Thursday, the night of the new commandment." Even as we gather around the sacred table, we remember what Judas did, but we refuse to name him, and his place remains empty. Even as we give thanks this night for Jesus' self-offering of his body and blood, and for Jesus' modeling of a new way of loving each other, dare we ask ourselves, who in our own lives is Judas? Isn't there for each of us at least one Judas who "wanders about in the night unforgiven?" Perhaps we can even dare to ponder Dietrich Bonhoeffer's question. Who is this Judas? Who is the betrayer? Can we say confidently, "Surely not I, Lord?" Or, in some ways, isn't each of us Judas, "slipping about in the shadows, unforgiven, unloved, utterly alone...?"

Are there any unforgivable sins? Was Judas forgiven for his betrayal of Jesus? In the *Inferno* Dante pictures Judas as eternally frozen in the lowest circle of hell. On the other hand, Rollins's telling of the story suggests that Jesus had forgiven Judas even before Judas slipped out. Many theologians believe that God's infinite desire to include all of us in God's loving embrace will eventually bring even the most hard-hearted, including the Judases among us, to accept God's forgiveness and mercy. If we seek to follow Jesus' example and "love one another as I have loved you," must we not also forgive ourselves for our own sinfulness and weakness? Must we not also forgive those who have wronged and betrayed us?

² "Proclaiming a Crucified Eschaton" (Institute for Liturgical Studies, Valparaiso University, 1998), 10ff, quoted in *Synthesis*, April 17, 2014.

One Lent I was part of a group that pondered the work of forgiveness in our lives. As part of that work we saw the film, “The Power of Forgiveness.” I found the film incredibly moving, partly because I had been to Belfast in Northern Ireland, Auschwitz, and Ground Zero in New York, all of which figure in the film. But for me, the most deeply moving segment of the film was the last segment.

In January, 1995, Azim Khamisa’s twenty-year old son Tariq was murdered in Lo Jolla, California, while delivering pizza. The shot that killed Tariq was fired by Tony Hicks, a fourteen-year old gang member. In the wake of the tragedy, out of unspeakable grief and despair, Khamisa vowed to transform his loss through the miraculous power of forgiveness. Believing that there were “victims at both ends of the gun,” Azim forgave Tony and founded the Tariq Khamisa Foundation to break the cycle of youth violence by saving lives, teaching peace, and planting seeds of hope in their future. A month after establishing the foundation, Azim invited Ples Felix, Tony’s grandfather and guardian, to join him. “It was a God-inspired meeting,” said Ples. “I saw a God-spirited person who was devastated. I shook his hand and expressed my deepest sympathy. I committed to do anything to help his family.” Together, since November 1995, the two men have delivered their message about the realities of violence, forgiveness, gangs, and the importance of making positive choices to over one million students. The foundation has established community service and youth mentoring programs. Khamisa has also written several books about his decision to forgive, while Felix has received numerous awards for his work in mediation and peace-making.³ Although Khamisa is a Muslim, both men model Jesus’ new commandment for us. Both men remind us that loving one another as Jesus loves us includes reaching out to those who have hurt us, and not letting anyone slip away unforgiven into the shadows of the night.

³<http://www.tkf.org/>

As we ponder the mystery of sin, forgiveness, and love, we remember thankfully all that God has done for us. We remember that God delivers us from bondage – of all kinds. We remember that Jesus helped us to see love in action. We remember that Jesus’ love for us and for the world took him to the cross. We remember that Jesus promised to be present to us whenever we eat bread and drink wine in his name. When we come again into his presence, we will especially remember that Jesus overcame all divisions and on the cross triumphed over all evil. United with him, nourished by him, we can forgive ourselves and others. We can look forward to that heavenly banquet when all will be finally and irrevocably united with Christ.