

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 7 Easter 5/13/18 Pastor Bill Uetricht

When I was growing up, my youngest sister, who has since died, was preoccupied with the singer Cher. She just loved her music, and, I think, her really long hair. Cher and her husband at the time Sonny sang a song that just kept coming back into my brain this past week as I brooded over the texts for today, especially the reading from Acts. The song sang over and over again, "And the beat goes." Lots of things change. Styles change. The lengths of skirts change. Dances change. But the beat goes on.

That song kept echoing in my brain because Acts seems very interested in figuring out how the early church goes into the future in light of a very difficult and sad portion of its story. And that portion is personified in Judas. What do we do with this Judas guy? What do we do with this one who Luke in Acts says, "was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry?" How do we understand this Judas character, who was selected by Jesus, was one of us, was a part of what we were up to but who, nonetheless, went astray, went down the most horrible path, became a traitor, a betrayer, a deeply lost man?

Acts seems to suggest that this was one of the first faith crises of the early church. The People of the Way, as the church was called early in its existence, had been deeply wounded by one of their own, by a friend and a member of the inner circle. How do communities recover when a spiritual leader goes astray? It is a question that most faith communities, even this one, have had to ask throughout their histories. It's not an easy question. It is not an easy dilemma for communities to work their way through. Sometimes communities just die or disintegrate as a result of these kinds of wounds.

Acts response to the struggle over Judas seems, at least initially, a bit contrived to me. "The Scriptures had to be fulfilled," Peter says, "which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas." The reference to David is about the Psalms; he is often in tradition said to be the author of the Psalms. The notion is that in one of the Psalms we

experience something that sounds like it was anticipating what Judas would later do. In other words, what Judas did was all a part of the plan, which is what many people often say. You know, it had to happen. The author of the Gospel of John in today's reading speaks of Judas as one who was "destined to be lost." It was all in the cards, in other words.

Now again, I find that approach to be contrived. But it's an approach that does appear in the Bible, primarily as a way of keeping God somehow still in charge of what is going on. I hear some of you make this same kind of claim when you are trying to figure out why bad or awful things occur in your lives. "There's a reason for everything; it's part of the plan." Perhaps I am just more of a modern person who wants to embrace the freedom of people and life and life's contingency—its unpredictable, unscripted character; but the "it-was-all-a-part-of-the-plan" argument for me just doesn't do it. Judas just becomes a pawn. The conclusion is reached even before the story is completed.

I wonder if there is another way of understanding Luke's perspective in Acts on how to deal with the Judas reality. Luke in both of his books—Luke and Acts—definitely sees the story of God's people known as Israel and the story of Jesus and the early church as held together through a common thread. Scholars call Luke's approach a matter of "salvation history." The story has come from some place. The story is going to some place. The story is not random, and the story includes the whole experience of God's people— an experience that entails both triumph and tragedy. The story incorporates Judas and what he did. And what he did has brought us here.

One of my good friends has relayed to me the story of her first marriage. It wasn't pleasant. It included what could be called abuse, alcoholism, deep unhappiness, depression, constant condemnation, the internalizing of the deprecation. Amazingly, this friend says that she would do it over again, that in some ways she doesn't regret it. What? Is she a masochist? No, she says that it is what brought her here. It's

what gave her her kids, whom she values greatly. And it is what eventually helped to create the person she has become and has helped lead her into the career that she has entered. Oh, it's not so much that it was all a part of the plan. And don't think that she didn't regret so much of the story. And don't think she will ever allow some of the story to ever happen again. But her story is not without purpose, not not held together by the threads of grace. It's what has brought her here.

The first struggle for the early church was how to deal with a traitor, how to understand tragedy, how to sort out betrayal, abuse, violence. Judas is a part of what got us here. And the Gospel of John is going to say that *here* (the cross) involves the greatest love that the world has ever known. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts will say that *here* (the resurrection and ascension) involves the triumph of love over the forces of destruction, a triumph that will be spread to the ends of the earth. The bad gunk, in other words, is woven into the whole story.

Truthfully, it's all about the story, which is why the apostles are dealing with the Judas reality in the first place. You see, the story must go on. With Judas gone, there are only eleven apostles left. Twelve are needed because there were twelve tribes of Israel. For the story to go on that began with creation and then led to the formation of a nation known as Israel that eventually becomes a confederation of twelve tribes, there needs to be *twelve* apostles. There are strings that weave this story together. This story holds together and must go on! The experience of tragedy and betrayal will not stop the story.

So a nominating committee must have met. It chooses two men: Justus and Matthias. And then amazingly, the apostles don't take polls, involve political consultants, place the two men in debates. They don't spend billions of dollars to get their candidate elected. They don't pour over the candidates' resumes. They don't force the two guys to do trial sermons. No, they roll the dice. They cast lots, thinking this will remove the human element from the process. The selection will be

God's selection. And voila, Matthias is chosen—Matthias whom we will never hear about again, a reality that I think is purposeful. What has happened isn't really about him. It's about the community. Or more appropriately, it's about the story that goes on and the Spirit of Christ who enables the story to go on and on and on. What Judas did will not prevent the story from going on into the future. Jesus is alive. The Spirit is at work. The story will go on. Tragedy, betrayal, and violence will not stop the story.

Who really knows why what happened happened? Who can figure it all out? Yes, Judas was a bum. Yes, he was a betrayer. Yes, he was one of us, one of our friends. Yes, one of our friends went sour.

Yes, you have done some crazy, irresponsible, immoral things. Yes, you have reason to feel regret and guilt. Yes, life has brought you a lot of tragedy, dealt you sometimes a bad hand. But the story isn't over. It's going on. The story of love cannot be stopped. The story of grace cannot be extinguished. The story of forgiveness will not be crucified forever. It will be raised again and again. The story will go on and on and on because the story is God's story. The beat will go on. "The beat goes on. The beat goes on. La de da de day. La de da de da!"