

“Having loved those who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end.” Amen.

This evening we are invited to join Jesus and his disciples for an intimate meal in the upper room of a house in Jerusalem. The sun has set and the light in the room has dimmed. There is warm laughter and chatter. People recline around a low table, leaning against each other or propped up on their elbows. And the table is full of food and wine.

Looking around the table we see many familiar faces: Of Jesus, the disciples, and many of Jesus' closest friends.

And then, there is Judas Iscariot. The Traitor.

In the midst of all this joy and fellowship, Judas has come to dinner with the intention of betraying Jesus. Hours later, this will lead to Jesus' arrest and then his violent crucifixion.

Judas is clearly the bad guy in this story.

It is hard to see anything good in our story's villain. And yet...this somber Maundy Thursday I find myself drawn to a more compassionate reading of Judas the Traitor. After all, isn't Judas like all of us, a complex character, not all good or all bad? And doesn't he illuminate something to us about our own human condition?

I think we are invited into a more nuanced reading of Judas right away.

When the gospel writer says that the devil - or the accuser - put it in Judas' heart to betray Jesus, even before this final supper, I wonder how long Judas had been listening to the accuser's accusations in the quietness of his own heart, making him feel distrustful of those who loved him, and creating a wedge in his relationships?

As much as I may want to judge Judas, I can also relate.

I have heard the voice of the accuser in my own mind and heart, not just once but many times throughout my life, and even throughout my day!

We are all hearing this voice, when we judge others and see ourselves as separate or superior, or right when *they* are wrong.

Sadly, Judas shows us that listening to these accusations only leads to death.

As the story continues, Jesus is arrested and condemned, and Judas is so overcome with guilt and seized with remorse, that he goes away to a desolate place and hangs himself. Judas has listened to the accuser's accusations one last time, this time against himself. And he has been judged guilty, and unforgivable. He has condemned himself as undeserving of life.

It is a dark ending to Judas' story, but it didn't have to be this way.

At the beginning of our gospel reading, it also says “Having loved those who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end.”

And this includes all of Jesus' disciples. And it includes Judas the Betrayer. Having loved Judas - Jesus loved Judas - and all those who betrayed him - to the very end. Jesus loved Judas all the way to Jesus' own death on the cross.

It was never going to be too late for Judas to silence the voice of the accuser and return to Jesus' love, because Judas the Traitor was also Judas the Beloved Disciple of Jesus, and Beloved child of God.

How different the story would have been, if instead of condemning himself, Judas returned to the disciples and let them put into practice Jesus' example at the Last Supper by taking turns washing his feet, cleansing him outwardly and inwardly, restoring him to right relationship with himself, God, and others.

Every day and every moment of our lives we have a choice, to listen to the voice of the accuser that separates, judges, and condemns, or to listen to the voice of love, that reminds us of our belovedness, and calls us children of God, and one with all of God's children.

And just like Judas, it is never too late for us to return to God's love, to be forgiven and healed, and raised to new life in Christ.

So, may we each hold fast to our Easter promise that: Having loved you who are in the world, Jesus will love you to the very end.

Amen.