

“Nearer My God to Thee: A Tenebrae Service with Newly Written Stanzas to a Familiar Tune” Sermon Text

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Scripture: Matthew 26:14–30

Message: “A Shocking Grace”

Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” Jesus answered, “You have said so.” While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

—Matthew 26:25–26

We sometimes assume that when God shows up, God shows up only for those who love God. We assume that if God shows up to those who have made themselves God’s enemies, God does so in judgment. In our text, Jesus likely has less than twenty-four hours to live. That’s in part because of what happens at the beginning of this evening’s text. There we read that someone has agreed to help the religious leaders arrest and kill Jesus. But that betrayer isn’t a religious leader or some other enemy of Jesus. He isn’t even someone who’s just looking to make a quick buck. No, Jesus’ betrayer is someone Matthew calls “one of the Twelve.” He is, in other words, one of Jesus’ closest friends. The religious leaders’ collaborator is Judas Iscariot.

Judas approaches the religious leaders with a business proposition. Interestingly enough, however, Judas never actually names Jesus. Even in the Bible’s original language Judas simply refers to Jesus as “him.” In fact, Judas never again refers to Jesus by name. At the Lord’s table, he addresses Jesus as “Rabbi.” And when Judas tries to undo his bargain with the religious leaders, he speaks only of “an innocent man.” But it’s clear to the religious leaders, as well as to Matthew, to whom Judas is referring. “What are you willing to give me,” he asks them in verse 15, “if I deliver him over to you?” Judas literally asks the religious leaders how much it’s worth to them if he betrays Jesus.

Matthew reports that Jesus is worth thirty pieces of silver to the religious leaders. In other words, the one by whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created was to the religious leaders worth about four months’ wages.

From that moment forward, adds Matthew, Judas begins looking for just the right moment to surrender Jesus to the religious authorities. He watches for his chance to betray the Savior of the

world. But, of course, none of this will come as a surprise to Jesus. In fact, Jesus warned his friends about his coming suffering already in Matthew 16. Jesus said he had to go to Jerusalem “and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law” and would “be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (v. 21).

As our text opens, Jesus is in Jerusalem, just as he’d promised his skeptical disciples. But Jesus is alive and eager to celebrate Passover, the annual celebration of God’s liberation of the Israelites from their Egyptian slavery. When he joins his disciples to celebrate Passover, they sit around a table together—all twelve of them. Jesus eats with his friends—including Judas. Jesus, says the biblical scholar Eugene Peterson, announces he has something hard but important to tell them. “One of you,” he grieves, “is going to hand me over to the conspirators” (Matthew 26:20–21, *The Message*).

This, reports Matthew, distresses Jesus’ friends. After all, Jesus has warned them that the religious leaders are going to torture and execute him. But this is the first time he’s even suggested that one of his friends is going to have a hand in that. Each of Jesus’ friends, Matthew continues, asks whether it will be him. We generally take those questions to be a sign that none of them will betray Jesus. Yet it’s just as likely that none of Jesus’ friends are at all sure it won’t be them. Each of Jesus’ friends seems to recognize that they too might betray him under the right circumstances. That’s why some modern paraphrases of our text quote Jesus’ friends as asking him something like, “Am I the one, Lord?” Judas too eventually pipes up. He echoes the same language of Jesus’ other friends. “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” But, of course, it is Judas. He has already agreed to surrender Jesus to the men who wish to torture and kill him. In fact, Jesus already knows that. “You said it,” he basically tells his friend Judas.

In a little while, we plan to sit down at another table. As he was on the first Maundy Thursday, Jesus will again be present among us, this time by his Spirit. Like Jesus and his friends who regularly celebrated Passover together, many of us have often celebrated the Lord’s Supper together. But though Jesus told his friends that night that one of them would betray him, tonight he looks at us and says to us, “*You* have betrayed me.” We’ve handed Jesus over to a hostile culture by acting like our culture rather than like Jesus. We’ve betrayed Jesus by failing to love God above all and our neighbors as much as ourselves. We’ve handed Jesus over by failing to see and treat those with whom we disagree as our fellow image bearers of God whom God loves deeply. We don’t have to try to deny it by asking, “Surely it isn’t me, is it, Lord?” You and You and I don’t even have to question whether we’re capable of betraying Jesus by asking something like, “Is it me, Jesus?” We’ve betrayed Jesus by what we’ve done and failed to do, by what we’ve said and failed to say, as surely as Judas did.

So is there room for you and me at this table? Or do our multiple betrayals disqualify us from celebrating the Lord’s Supper? Can we betrayers stay here? Or should we leave so that only

deserving people can eat this bread and drink this cup? Well, take a look at our text's table and its celebration of the first Lord's Supper. Who's there?

Verse 26 reports that it's Jesus' "disciples." So we're not surprised to see Peter, James, and John. But if you're like me, you have always assumed that Judas was absent. I long assumed that Jesus either somehow chased him away or he voluntarily fled what we often call the Last Supper.

But listen to our text without verse and paragraph breaks: "Judas, the one who would betray him, said, 'Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?' Jesus answered, 'You have said so.' While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'" Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you.'"

None of the gospel accounts of the Last Supper even suggests that Judas left before Jesus and his disciples shared the meal. Matthew doesn't report that Jesus offered the cup that is his blood to everyone but Judas. No, Matthew simply reports that Jesus shares his life-giving body and blood with his disciples. All of his friends. Including Judas. Jesus' generosity and hospitality make no distinction between deserving and undeserving recipients of the gifts of his body and blood.

Because when God shows up, God doesn't just show up for people who love the Lord. When God makes God's home among us in Christ, God doesn't somehow exclude those who make themselves God's enemies. When God shows up, God appears to all those God creates in God's image and for whom God deeply cares. The Last Supper and its Lord's Supper remembrance aren't for perfect people. The Lord's Supper isn't even just for pretty good people. If so, Jesus would have been the only person there, and he would be the only one here.

Jesus shares his body and blood with all of his gathered friends: with Judas, who will betray him, with Peter, who will deny even knowing him, and with his disciples, every last one of whom will abandon him after the authorities arrest him.

This celebration isn't for perfect or even pretty good Christians. It isn't for Christians who completely understand what's going on here. The Lord's Supper is for everyone who is sorry about their sins, believes in Jesus for our salvation, and wants to follow Jesus more closely. This is God's shocking grace.