

Traitors

Matthew 26:20-24

April 13, 2014

It's sobering, isn't it, to look at ourselves, to take a good look at ourselves -- not each of us, one-by-one, but looking at all of us who call ourselves people of God, looking at all of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus? It is sobering to take a good look and to recognize the thieves and hypocrites and murderers and vultures and faithless servants among us and to realize that we have met the enemy and he is ... us.

The enemy is not "out there!" Scoffers and unbelievers are not the enemy. Drunkards and hussies are not the enemy. Drug dealers and gang members are not the enemy. Vulgar music and trashy movies are not the enemy.

Folks who make fun of religion and religious people and folks who want little to do with either are not the enemy. Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are not the enemy.

Godless culture and godless government and godless science are not the enemy.

No. The godless, godforsaken world "out there" is not the enemy. God loved the world so much. God loved this world so much. Should we love the world any less?

"They" are not the enemy. They are the ones we are called to love. They are the ones we are called to serve. They are the ones to whom we bring good news. They are the ones to whom we bear witness of the amazing grace of God!

They are not the enemy. The enemy is us.

The enemy is us, when we distort or dilute the gospel to suit our own purposes and fulfill our own agendas, and so make a sham of the message God has entrusted with us.

The enemy is us, when we bring shame on the name by which we are called -- Christian -- by using that name to hurt or to judge or to exploit.

The enemy is us, when we set ourselves apart, when we put ourselves above, when we think of ourselves as holy -- which we are, but when we think "holy," we mean "better than," but "holy" really means being set apart to serve a special purpose, being set apart to serve. We are no better than anybody else.

We have simply been entrusted with an extraordinary gift that we are meant to pass on.

The enemy is us, when we despise the world instead of loving it.

But why? Why do we do it? What motivates our thievery, our hypocrisy, our readiness to resort to violence, taking advantage of vulnerable people, neglecting to care for each other?

The usual things: greed and pride, thirst for power, need for control. Thieves and hypocrites and even murderers and vultures aren't out to defame God. It is just that their own needs, their own wants, our own insecurities, our own egos, get in the way. The Pharisees thought they were serving God. The crusaders thought they were serving God. Fred Phelps thought he was serving God.

And faithless servants? Just lazy or selfish or inattentive or preoccupied. We don't necessarily have anything against God or against each other. We are just too busy taking care of ourselves to bother with taking care of each other. It's nothing personal ...

But traitors? That's personal! Turning your back on a friend, doing harm to someone close to you, betraying someone who trusts you -- that's personal. I have met the enemy, and the enemy is ... you!

But why? Why do you want to do me harm? How? How could you betray my trust? What motivates a traitor? We can almost "understand" thieves and vultures. Their victims are "merely" the collateral damage of their blind pursuit of greed and glory. But traitors? Why intentionally hurt the one you love?

Why, Judas? Why would you, one of the twelve, one of the chosen, betray your Teacher?

Judas has been analyzed and psychoanalyzed. His story has been told and retold in many different ways and from many different angles. He has sometimes even been cast as some kind of tragic figure, some kind of misunderstood hero.

But the gospel does none of that. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew is not interested in speculating about his motives or finding some kind of rationale for his behavior or even, for that matter, branding him as inherently evil. The only words for Judas are words of pity, spoken by Jesus: "It would have been better for [him] if he had never been born!"

The gospel story doesn't say why he did it. It just says he did it. This is what happened: one of those closest to Jesus, one of his dearest friends, betrayed him.

One of those closest to Jesus betrayed him. One? Just one?

They all betrayed him! The twelve with whom he had spent so much time, the twelve in whom he had invested so much -- they all betrayed him! They had heard his startling teaching. They had seen his astonishing miracles. But more than that, much more than that, that had witnessed for themselves his compassion, his mercy, his patience, his tenderness, his courage, his unwavering love for God and his unprecedented welcome of outcasts.

He had already saved them, from aimlessness and sin. He had already rescued them, from ignorance and hopelessness. He had told them that the kingdom of God was near, and the longer they were with him, the more they knew that it was. But they abandoned him! When the armed horde came to arrest Jesus, they all left him and ran away.

Except for Peter. Peter kept his distance, he stayed out of sight, but he followed, watching, waiting to see what would happen. And then ...

One of those closest to Jesus, one of his dearest friends, betrayed him. Was it Judas? Or was it Peter? Or was it both of them? Or was it all of them?

Some days after this, Jesus saw Peter again, and when he did, he asked Peter: "Do you love me?" Judas killed himself in his grief over what he had done. Jesus didn't get the opportunity to ask him that question, but Jesus did ask Peter: "Do you love me?" Because it's personal!

It's personal.

When we love something else more than Jesus, we betray him.

When we love our way more than his way, we betray him.

When we love what we have or what we want to have more than we love having him, we betray him.

When we love our own lives more than the life he gives us, we betray him.

"Do you love me?" Do you? Do you love Jesus? Do you love Jesus more, more than anything else? The enemy are not those who hate him, but those who fail to love him, by loving him less.

They didn't betray him. We did.

They didn't abandon him. We did.

They didn't turn their backs in him. We did.

They didn't kill him. We did.