

I THOUGHT I WAS RIGHT!

reached by the Reverend Douglas I. Norris at the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, California, PALM SUNDAY, March 31, 1985.

*Mt 26.14-16; 47-50; 27.3-5 John 12.1-6*

Good morning. My name is Judas. Thank you for letting me come. I do need a hearing. I want to give my side. I am so misunderstood. I'm called the traitor! History has judged me severely. I judge myself severely. But, I thought I was right. Can you appreciate that? I thought I was right.

Yes, I connived with the Sanhedrin (the council of chief priests) to lead the soldiers to Jesus when there was no crowd. You see, they did not want to arrest him when there were people around as Jesus was very popular. You remember the large crowd that greeted us with palm branches when we entered Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin did not want the people stirred up. They didn't want to risk inciting a riot. So, they sought to arrange a nice, quiet, unobtrusive arrest. Yes, I helped them. Yes, I took thirty pieces of silver from them. But, before you also decide that I was a thieving traitor who would do anything for money, please let me explain. May I explain? Oh, it feels so good to be able to talk about this. Where should I begin?

I guess I'll begin at the beginning. Jesus believed in me. I'm not a bad guy, or Jesus would have seen that in me. Jesus saw "disciple" material in me. Jesus trusted me. He appointed me the treasurer. I carried the money. Whenever we were in a place where no one knew us, or when no one offered us food, some of the disciples would go to purchase food. I gave them money. I managed the finances. No, I wasn't bonded! They trusted me!

Some of the historians have been quite harsh with me. John, for example, wrote in his gospel that I liked to help myself as if I had sticky fingers. Now that is in the Bible for all time! How do I live that down? No, I did not help myself. No, I did not steal. I was not a thief! At least the other gospel writers did not accuse me of stealing but John, the author, lived years later. He did not know any of us and, by the time he wrote his gospel, my reputation was bad. I can understand why he was nasty, but it still hurts. Jesus trusted me, though. Jesus believed in me.

I was a trusted, respected disciple--one of the twelve Jesus chose to be his core group. Of all the disciples, I was the most practical. You've got to understand that part. I was the practical one. I was the realist. The rest were dreamers. Even Jesus was a dreamer. You do know that about him, don't you. Yes, he was likeable. People were attracted to him. He won people's strong loyalties. Why, I would have done anything for him. But, he was a dreamer. He was idealistic. He had his head in the clouds. He had no business sense. We had no budget. He never asked for a monthly financial statement. My books were never once audited. He thought money grew on trees! I really thought that the reason Jesus chose me to be one of the twelve disciples was to balance the group. Someone had to be practical. Someone had to be realistic.

Look at it this way. We had a revolution to organize. We had a kingdom to establish. We had to rid our country--our beloved holy land--of those cursed Romans. For centuries, we had been walked on by foreigners, trampled under the boots of soldiers. Now, God had heard our cry! God had responded to our pain! God had sent us the Messiah. God sent Jesus to be our leader. And, what a leader Jesus could have been! He knew how to organize. He chose twelve to be in his core group. He organized missions. One time

he sent out seventy on a mission. He organized them into pairs--two-by-two--and sent them out into surrounding villages. He was effective. He had the people eating out of the palm of his hand. Huge crowds followed him. One time over 5,000 gathered to hear him speak, and he even fed them without dipping into my treasury! The man was a master. Oh, what he could have done against the Romans.

But, what did he do? I just couldn't believe it! I just didn't understand him. He bounced little children on his knee! He went to parties with the riff-raff! He loved to associate with people who had no political influence. And, how he loved to argue. He argued with the priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes. Now, why was he arguing with them? They were our own people. They weren't the enemy. The enemy was the Roman emperor. Why was he arguing with our own people?

And, then, to top it off--I just couldn't believe it. I just didn't understand him. There we were, trying to organize a revolution, trying to raise funds, trying to reach people...there we were in Jerusalem, the capital, with huge crowds greeting us with palm branches...such an opportunity! And what did he do? He went off to Bethany with friends, and Mary washed his feet in expensive oil! I was fit to be tied! You don't wash each other's feet for you wear shoes and socks. But, in my day, in my land, it was hot, dry, dusty, and we walked everywhere. When you arrived at someone's house, what a delightful experience to have your feet washed, and bathed in oil to soothe and heal the cuts and bruises. Pure delight! But, Mary washed Jesus' feet in very expensive perfumed oil! I couldn't believe it. I used that classical approach and asked, "Why are we wasting this expensive oil? We could have given the money to the poor." That's a favorite ploy--when you disagree with an expenditure, bring in the poor! But, Jesus saw right through me. He had the sharpest eyes. He said, "Don't criticize Mary. You will always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me." Now, I ask you, what did that mean?? I still don't understand it. I still don't understand him.

I couldn't understand why Jesus was wasting his time and our money. So, I made a plan. I was the practical one, and I made a plan. I thought I was right. I thought I could force Jesus to claim his kingdom, to use his power, to declare himself leader of the revolution, to call the people to unite with him. Do you see? I thought I would force his hand.

So I went to the Sanhedrin. I thought that if they got their hands on Jesus, he would resist, and the revolution would start. I asked for money in order to establish credibility in their eyes. If I hadn't asked for money, they might have suspected a trick. Surely you don't think I wanted that money for myself! If I had wanted to be rich, I would have become a C. P. A.

I thought I was doing the right thing. In fact, I was sure Jesus understood what I was doing, and that he approved of what I was doing. There in the upper room that evening after dinner, Jesus told me to go do what I had to do. I interpreted that to mean that he wanted me to betray him into the hands of the Sanhedrin.

So, I left the dinner, went to the chief priests, led the soldiers back to the Garden of Gethsemane, arranged a signal, went up to Jesus, greeted him, and kissed him. He called me, "Friend," and I thought, here it comes! Now, he will resist. Now, he'll claim his kingdom. Now, the revolution will begin!

But, he didn't fight. He didn't resist. He didn't call the people to arms. He let them crucify him. He died. Why did he die? Why did he call me "friend" when I had betrayed him; not only had I betrayed his location to the authorities, but I betrayed his ideals. I just hadn't understood him.



I tried to undo the terrible wrong. I went to the chief priests, offered the money sack, and begged them to let Jesus go. But, they laughed at me. They laughed at me. I threw the thirty pieces of silver at them. I threw the filthy money! My beautiful plan had failed. I hadn't understood him. I had tried to make Jesus into someone else. I had tried to force him to be someone he wasn't. I knew I had gone too far. I let him down. I didn't know what to do. I was so ashamed. I went outside, to a tree, took a rope, and....well, you know.

Oh, the guilt I feel...the heavy burden, the heavy weight I carry with me...oh, the pressure around my neck. Yet, in spite of my sin, he called me "friend." There in the garden, I kissed him and he called me "friend."

I thought I was right. But, I never understood him. Do you? Do you understand him? Do you believe him? I bet you understand me more than you understand him. You go along with him to a certain extent, but you set limits, don't you. "Love your enemies," he said. "Do good to those who persecute you...Those who live by the sword will die by the sword... Blessed are the peacemakers...Love your neighbor." Sounds good. I wonder if anyone will ever understand him. I wonder if anyone will ever believe him, if anyone will ever try his way. I didn't understand him. Do you? Are you the folks who will do it?

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~~TENTH IN SERIES, TEN-COMMANDMENTS REVISITED~~  
~~THE NINTH COMMANDMENT~~

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