

The Judas chromosome: Matthew 26:14—27:10

Maybe the real reason we show betrayers so little compassion is that we're afraid there is some Judas chromosome within all of us.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

We don't know a lot about Judas, except that Jesus and the other disciples trusted him a great deal. No doubt that is why they made him their treasurer. We also know that at the Last Supper Judas was sitting next to Jesus when Jesus said that he would be betrayed by the one "who dips his hand into the bowl with me." To share a bowl with Jesus meant that Judas was sitting in a position of honor and trust. All of that makes his betrayal more painful.

We would love to know exactly why Judas betrayed Jesus. Did he do it for the 30 pieces of silver? Or was it because he was disappointed in his Lord? Maybe Judas had never come to know Jesus as Lord. Matthew tells us that when Jesus announced that one of them would betray him, all of them exclaimed, "Surely not I, Lord?" except Judas, who said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Was that it? Did Judas see Jesus only as a teacher? Maybe. In Exodus 21:32 we are told that the price paid for killing someone's slave was 30 pieces of silver. Had Judas betrayed Jesus long ago by considering him one who had not fulfilled expectations? Again, we just don't know.

Maybe it is significant that Matthew's Gospel doesn't spell out Judas's motivations. It leaves lots of room for us to consider the many reasons why someone would betray the Savior.

Societies have always reserved their harshest judgment for those who commit some act of betrayal. It is a sin against the trust that is critical to maintain relationships between two people or among a nation's people. Betrayal shatters the fragile bonds that hold us together, and when we lose our ability to live together we lose our ability to be truly human. That is why betrayal can destroy a marriage, family, church or community. It's why the nation is outraged at a man who chose to fight against his country in Afghanistan, and why we are so disgusted with the managers of Enron. We have always been hard on Judas and all of his imitators.

Could it be that the real reason we show betrayers so little compassion is that we're afraid there is some Judas chromosome within all of us? We hate the thought that we too are capable of betraying trust. When Jesus claimed that one of the Twelve would betray him, the anxiety within all of their souls rushed to the surface. "Surely not I, Lord?" They might as well have said, "I've been worried about that, but I thought I had it under control."

The sin that is most difficult to forgive in others is always the one we struggle against in our own lives. This is particularly true if we have lied to ourselves about our trustworthiness so often that we no longer think we have a dark side. None is as merciless to others as the one who has no mercy on his own capacity for evil.

In Jesus' last hours none of the disciples was a model of faithfulness. Peter denied knowing his Lord three times. After the awful crucifixion was over, none of the Twelve even attended to Jesus' body. At a time when trustworthiness could have endangered them, all the disciples failed.

That terrifies us. We think we are doing OK on our commitments now, but we just don't know about that terrible Judas chromosome. When will it kick in like a cancer and destroy a life built on righteous resolve? Since we all live with the possibility of betrayal, we fear Judas more than we fear the cross. The cross is a symbol of heroic self-sacrifice. But Judas is a symbol of the evil within us.

One of the messages of Holy Week is that sooner or later every disciple will betray Jesus. We will betray him in the workplace when it will cost too much to think like a Christian, and in our homes when the anger is so great that we hurt those who trust us, and in the sacred commitments we make that we simply cannot keep. We will betray Jesus by our indifference to the poor, by our refusal to turn the other cheek to our enemies, and by the deaf ears we turn to heaven's call to live for higher purposes.

When Judas realized the gravity of his actions, he was filled with remorse and said, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." We are told that he then repented. But that's not enough. To repent means to turn, and what is most important is *where* we turn in our repentance.

Judas turned to those who despised him, and went back to the chief priests to return the money. But these priests were so self-righteous that they wouldn't contaminate themselves with blood money. The powerful maintain their power by refusing to show mercy on failures.

By contrast, Peter and the other disciples lived with their betrayal until they encountered the risen Savior, the only one who could offer forgiveness. In the gospel according to Judas there is no forgiveness, there is just sin and the futile effort to make things right on your own. In the gospel of Jesus, there is always grace that can create a new ending to our lives. All we have to do is turn to him.

It is striking that Judas and Jesus died about the same time, one as a tragic suicide and the other as a forgiving sacrifice. Judas portrays the tragic story of a fall from the heights to the depths. It is a fall that all of us will make sooner or later. But the greatest tragedy was that Judas was not at the cross to hear Jesus say, "Father, forgive . . ."