

April 10, Passion Sunday C (Luke 22:14-23:56)

We betray Jesus for far less than was offered to Judas.

by [Stephanie Perdew](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue

Jesus wants to give us his kingdom. He is going to entrust it to his disciples, as he tells them the last time he reclines with them at the table. He has eagerly awaited the meal. He has taken a cup and blessed it, a loaf and broken it, another cup concluding the supper. He praises those who have stood by him in his trials; he confers on them the kingdom that he has received from the one he calls Father. They now have the power of spiritual discernment and judgment.

When we hear this narrative, do we think, *these* people? You're conferring a kingdom on them? Do they really have the powers of spiritual discernment? Are they fit to judge our faith? As the story unfolds, we will find their faith wanting.

At the table, they argue about who is the greatest. Out on the Mount of Olives, they sleep while Jesus prays. Judas betrays him with a kiss, one of them draws a sword, and Jesus must say, "No more of this!" By the fire in the courtyard, Peter carries out the predicted denial—once, twice, three times—that he denied he would ever commit. We didn't believe Peter's proclamation of bravery earlier, and we don't believe his bitter tears now.

Surely, we would do better than these disciples. We would be more faithful. Put our egos aside. Not fight about who was the greatest. Sheathe our swords. We wouldn't betray Jesus. We would be brave enough to say we knew him and to stay by him. Once, twice, three times.

The lectionary brings us these stories year after year because even though we have heard them once or twice or three times, we still don't want to believe that we are just like these disciples. We would not have been more faithful. Our egos do get the best of us. We fume and fight about who is the greatest, the holiest, the most merciful, the most just. We betray Jesus for far less than was offered to Judas. Like

Peter, we too say we don't know Jesus at all.

What we fail to remember is that even as the disciples fight about who is the greatest, Jesus tells them that they have stood by him in his trials. Jesus knows they will betray him, and he tells them he knows, even before he confers the kingdom. He knows them through and through and entrusts it to them anyway. There are no better or more faithful disciples to choose from. When they fail, he forgives. Forgiven sinners seeded the faith of the church that formed from the tree on Golgotha.

Forgiven sinners seeded our faith, baptized us, served us our first communion, catechized us, taught Sunday school to us, walked in witness and protest with us, preached to us. Those who officiate our marriages are forgiven sinners, and those who will bury us will be too. As Augustine knew many years ago, it's not the work of the worker but the work worked by God's grace. Those who enter into marriage will need to forgive their partners not once, but twice and three times and more for betrayals ordinary or great. Those who walk in witness or serve in the soup kitchens will need forgiveness for the times their own needs get confused with the needs of those they seek to serve and center.

But none of our unfaithfulness will ever negate God's grace. Jesus confers his kingdom on us not because of our perfection but despite our imperfections. Forgiven sinners comprise his church. There are no other disciples to choose from. As we hear these stories and admit we are just like those disciples, we know this as good news. There is a reason these stories and liturgies of confession and renewal intertwine as we walk the path of Holy Week. As we hear them, we know we need to be forgiven, and as we lament and confess, we can be assured that we are.

Years ago I served a church that did a dramatic reading of the Passion narrative. The choir members were supposed to play the role of the crowd and shout, "Crucify, crucify him!"

"I don't want to say that!" said one of the altos. "I don't want to do this!"

"That's the whole point," replied a soprano.

It is. We deny we would have been in the crowd without confessing how easy it would be to spiral into it. We don't want to say "crucify," but these stories and the liturgies shaped around them help us to confess that we could have joined that chant that day, and we could be tempted to join it tomorrow.

Which is why we hear these stories. They unsettle us and tempt us to think we would have known and done better. But we don't know what we're doing, as Jesus says from the cross. And he forgives us anyway. Once, twice, as many times as we need.