

Lent Wednesday 5A (4/1/20)
Entering the Passion of Jesus
Chapter 5: The Last Supper: Risking the Loss of Friends
Luke 22:14-27

“For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by which he is betrayed!”

In theory, the presider at the Lord’s table reserves the right to refuse communion. I get uneasy, however, thinking about a scenario wherein I might exercise that right. This is the Lord’s Supper, after all, a gift of God’s grace alone; who am I to withhold it from anyone? Indeed, at Peace we invite all who hunger for Christ’s mysterious presence to receive the bread and wine, his very life, given and poured out “for you.”

But, if communion is a foregone conclusion – if God’s promises are divorced from God’s insistence on our faithfulness and love – then how much is it worth? If we take the meal for granted, what is its effect? According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, such grace is “cheap”: “The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”¹

In fact, grace is precious. This is no more apparent to me than at the Last Supper itself. “This is my body, which is given for you,” Jesus tells the twelve, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table.” On account of a traitor, Jesus’ mercy will cost him everything.

We’ve made a scapegoat out of Judas, thanks in part to the Gospel writers, who, as Amy-Jill Levine points out, “leave us with different stories [of Judas] and so different impressions, each one worse than the previous one.”² We may love to hate him, but it isn’t necessarily helpful to distinguish ourselves from Judas too readily. In Matthew, Jesus’ prediction of his betrayal is met with the same response from all the disciples: “Surely not I, Lord?” As one interpreter observes, “They all realize that they are capable of betraying their teacher.”³

In other words, Judas represents the fickleness, the selfishness, the disloyalty common to all disciples. In Judas we see ourselves at our worst. And thus, in him we also see God at God’s best. “Jesus included Judas at the Last Supper,” a seminary professor once said, “who ought we to exclude?”

“Judas, too, is in the image of the divine,” Levine affirms, “He is not a demon, although he may seem to us to be one. He is a human being. And we cannot afford to demonize human beings.”⁴ That caution also applies to each of us.

Grace is precious, and we are precious in God’s sight – so precious, in fact, that God incurs the greatest cost for our sake. All we can do is reach out our hands as a gesture of need and gratitude.

¹ *The Cost of Discipleship*.

² 116.

³ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-4-5/2090#resources>.

⁴ 119.