

**The 7th Sunday of Eastertide
(also known as Ascension Sunday)**

John 17:6-19; Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; I John 5:9-13

For an introduction to the Feast of Ascension, see “Ascension Day” for the Thursday preceding this Sunday.

John 17:6-19 is part of the “High Priestly Prayer” of Jesus that occupies the entirety of the seventeenth chapter and concludes the final teaching of Jesus that extends from chapter 13 through 17.

In his prayer, Jesus reminds both God and his listeners that with these final acts of betrayal, trial, scourging and crucifixion, he will have completed the work God had called him to do (17:4). That work was essentially to create an alternative community to the domination system Israel had become under its religious/political leaders (17:2-3, 6). This relational community does not embrace the values and standards of the systems of domination of Israel, Rome or the world. Rather, they are centered on living in unity with God and each other because of the redemptive work Jesus has done in their lives (17:7-9). Now, as Jesus leaves them through death, they are to go out into the world of the domination systems, living out and modeling the kingdom life of God’s alternative society, the kingdom of God (vss. 10-14).

Jesus then makes this profound prayer: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (vss. 15-18).

Jesus’ disciple community, his “beloved community” is distinct – profoundly distinct – from a society that accepts and even endorses systems that dominate – political forces that oppress, economic entities that exploit, religious systems that control – all of them driven by a lust for greed, accumulation and power. The Christian community is created by Jesus to be the very opposite of such domination.

But they are not to maintain their life together of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and dynamic corporate relationship with God by withdrawing from this surrounding, dominating culture. They are not to be taken “out of the world”. Rather, they are to enter into it, be engaged in it, come up against the very evil of it (even the personified “Evil One” of it). Just as Jesus was sent into the world of domination to expose it for the sham that it is, so the Christian community is to do the same, relentlessly proclaiming the truth and being “sanctified” (or set apart) as the living example of the truth of that alternative culture that they are to live out before the world.

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:20-21).

This community – the Christian community – is not made up exclusively of those who are surrounding Jesus on that Maundy Thursday when this prayer was prayed. That community

consists of a “great host” yet unborn who will hear Christ’s call to embrace the life-style of a relational community and will make up an alternative reality down through the centuries which – by its very existence – will be a witness against every age’s dominant culture of greed and power-mongering. This community will create one indivisible body over countless centuries because it will be a reflection of the unity of the Father and of the Son (17:20-24)!

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (vss. 25-26).

Here, indeed, is the power of this community that will guarantee that it will always stand over against the dominating culture, calling it to accountability and remaining its embarrassment! The Christian community is a “beloved community”; it is one that has experienced and keeps on experiencing the redemptive, transforming love of God in Christ. It is a community in which each of its individuals has experienced and keeps on experiencing the redemptive, transforming love of God. They “know” God! And they “know” God because they “know” Jesus. And Jesus “knows” them – down through the countless centuries. And thus, God “knows” them as well with a knowledge, not simply of intellectual perception but of personal and intimate relationship.

With such power at work in their midst, the beloved community as a whole will never be seduced away by the commitment of the systems to greed, domination and power! They may be tempted. Some may even yield to that temptation. But the Body of Christ, in its entirety as the “beloved community” will remain “in the face” of the systems. Thus, Jesus can rest in the reality that “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do” (17:4)!

But what about Judas?

Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus to the systems, making it possible to arrest Jesus and to get him executed, is named in this text by Jesus as “the son of destruction” (17:12).¹ By choosing to betray Jesus, Judas created a major dilemma for the church that is captured in this passage.

By all appearances, Judas had seemed to be chosen by Jesus to follow Christ, just as had all the other disciples. The disciples all believed that each of them had been chosen by Jesus – not just to be Christ’s followers but also forgiven, redeemed and made new. They all believed that they had not so much chosen Jesus as Jesus had chosen and called them.

But what about Judas? Judas betrayed the one who had chosen him. So was Judas not chosen? Was he, instead, simply a pawn not elected by God, but apparently elected in order to bring about the betrayal of Jesus? The four passages of the lectionary for the 7th Sunday in Eastertide all address this troubling question. John has Jesus exclude Judas with the words, “I guarded (the

¹ The phrase “son of destruction” is translated “the one destined to be lost” in the NRSV. That translation captures the sense of destiny or inevitability that is in the Greek. However, translating the Greek as “son of darkness” is particularly poignant because that is the term that is elsewhere used to denote the Antichrist (e.g., II Thess. 2:3). In other words, by acting as he was destined to act, Judas was acting as a “little Antichrist” (rather than a “little Christ”).

disciples), and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost – the Son of Darkness” (17:12). Even among those who made up the “beloved community” lays the traitor!

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26 deals with the adjustments the disciples needed to make as the result of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus and his subsequent suicide (Mt. 27:3-10).² Judas’ betrayal and death posed numerous problems to the earliest church both theologically and practically. It posed a theological problem because of the belief all the disciples embraced that they did not so much choose to follow Jesus as Jesus chose them. The earliest church firmly believed that any who were a part of the Body of Christ had been chosen, called, adopted, forgiven, redeemed, provided with knowledge of “the mystery of God’s will” and given “the seal of his Holy Spirit” (cf. Eph. 1:3-13) so that they might engage the world with both the promise and the reality of the realization of God’s kingdom upon earth.

But what about Judas? Was he also chosen? If so, how could one explain his decision and subsequent action both to betray Jesus (resulting in Jesus’ death) and his suicide? And if he wasn’t chosen, yet was perceived as chosen and was accepted by the disciple band as such, might that not also mean that others of them were only apparently chosen?

Luke deals with that issue in this passage in the book of Acts by suggesting that Judas had been chosen by God to betray Jesus, not to serve Christ. He defends that argument by stating that his betrayal and fate was predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 1:18-20), quoting from Psalms 69:26 and 109:8. Both our gospel lesson and epistle lesson of today take a more nuanced approach to this theological dilemma (see the expositions written for John 17:6-19 and I John 5:9-13).

But there was a practical dilemma created by Judas’ betrayal and death, as well. And Luke deals with that dilemma in the Acts passage for this 7th Sunday of Eastertide.

Acts 1:15-26 essentially deals with the re-creation of the band of the twelve apostles that had been reduced to eleven because of the death of Judas. But why was it necessary for there to be twelve? Could they not get along with only eleven apostles? The leaders of the earliest church didn’t think so.

The followers of Jesus believed that the church was the “new Israel” made up of a new “twelve tribes” (disciples) built upon a “new covenant” (or “New Testament”) and Law made between God and God’s people and brought about through the work of a “new Moses” (Jesus) at a “new Mount Sinai” (the cross on the hill of Calvary). Thus, God had replaced an unfaithful Israel with a “new chosen people”, the Church that was now assigned by God to accomplish what Israel had

² Suicide was particularly repugnant to the Jews of Jesus’ day. Although there are no specifically biblical prohibitions to suicide, it is implied in both the Old and New Testaments. It was particularly seen as a highly intentional breaking of the sixth commandment (Exod. 20:13; cf. Gen. 9:5-6). Josephus (a Jewish contemporary of Luke, Peter and Paul) labeled suicide as “an impious act against God our Creator” (War III.viii.5), and later rabbinic literature specifically prohibits it (Gen. Rabbah 34:21b). Essentially, to the earliest Christians, suicide was unthinkable, and therefore Judas’ suicide was as evil, in their eyes, as had been his betrayal of Jesus.

been faithless in accomplishing – the establishment of God’s shalom community for the entire world.

But how could the church constitute the “new Israel” with only eleven “tribes” (disciples)? The leaders of the church had to appoint a new twelfth disciple to take the place of Judas. Acts 1:15-26 tells the story of how they did that, choosing a man by the name of Matthias through the casting of lots. Thus, Matthias is appointed by the leaders of the church to take the place of Judas and thus re-establish the “fiction” of the “twelve tribes of Jesus’ new Israel” through the twelve apostles.

Intriguingly, that fiction of the “twelve tribes of Jesus” didn’t long endure. Although the Twelve play a highly strategic role in the Gospel of Luke (e.g., 6:13; 8:1; 9:1, 12; 18:31; 22:3, 47), they fade into obscurity in the book of Acts. The last mention of them is found in Acts 6:2, and then the concept simply disappears. That the necessity of maintaining the fiction of the “twelve tribes of Jesus” had quickly dissipated in the church is revealed by the fact that when James, one of the twelve, is killed by Herod about ten years after the founding of the church (Acts 12:1), there is no effort made to replace him. The need to have twelve apostles representing the new Israel’s “twelve tribes” had obviously served its purpose, and was no longer necessary to maintain!

Matthias had been chosen by the disciples to replace Judas as the twelfth leader of the church, and had been chosen by lot. But was he the person *God* had chosen to replace Judas?

It is intriguing that the lot was never used again by the early church to choose its leadership.³ But it is even more intriguing how God made it clear that God had chosen someone other than Matthias to be the twelfth leader of the church. After his choice, Matthias is never referred to again in the New Testament, nor is there any mention of Matthias in early church history. But there is another not among the Twelve who plays a most influential and formative role in the earliest Christian church. And we cannot discern who that man is unless we first understand the unique role Judas had been chosen by Jesus to play (and it wasn’t to betray Jesus)!

Judas had played a unique role in the disciple band. Because of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, he is normally condemned (in fact, the phrase, “a Judas” has entered into the English language as meaning anyone who betrays another). Consequently, we do not often tend to examine Judas’ role in the disciple community *before* his betrayal and suicide, and thus discern the influential role he played. But if we do, we find a most extraordinary man.

That Judas was essentially a logical, rational, principled advocate for the building of the kingdom of God stands throughout the gospel narratives. His seating at the Last Supper next to Jesus (Mt. 26:20-25; John 13:21-27) and his interactions with the other disciples reveal him playing a role equal to that of Peter or John. Judas was apparently the disciple who handled the administration and planning of the disciple band, and was trusted with all its money (John 13:29). But the greatest argument for Judas as a builder of a vision and strategy for the establishment of the kingdom of God were the events surrounding his terrible betrayal.

³ Casting lots was an acceptable means for ascertaining God’s choice of leaders in Israel or of ascertaining God’s will, according to the Law (Exodus 28:30).

Consider the apparent absurdity of the last days of Jesus' life. At the beginning of "Holy Week", Jesus led a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Four days later, one of his closest friends betrayed him to the authorities, guaranteeing his death. From the heights of public adulation to total rejection in just four days! What possible explanation could be given for such despicable action on Judas' part?

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday nearly 2,000 years ago, it was the culmination of Judas' dream for Israel. In that ride into Jerusalem, Jesus was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy and thus declaring himself the Messiah or ruler of the Jews. To patriots like Judas, Jesus' declaration of himself as Messiah meant only one thing – the conquest of Rome in Palestine so that Israel could become an independent nation once again.

But Jesus never took advantage of the opportunity his highly prophetic declaration of himself as Messiah created through his entrance into Jerusalem ((Mt. 21:1-11; cf. Zech. 9:9-14; I Kings 1:33-48). Jesus led no attack upon the Roman garrison that the prophet Zechariah implies will occur following the triumphant procession. Rather, Jesus only verbally attacks the priests in the Temple who should be his compatriots in overthrowing Rome. He doesn't seek to mobilize an army; he only continues to teach the people. He doesn't claim the rulership of Jerusalem; instead he only weeps over the city because it doesn't recognize who he is (Mt. 23:37-39). Judas realized that Jesus was not doing anything to bring about a revolution against Rome in spite of the biblical prophecies that suggested *that* was precisely what the Messiah was to do following his triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

The Christian Church, over its 2,000 years of history, has developed only two theories adequate to explain Judas' betrayal of Jesus. The first theory is that Judas betrayed Jesus to force his hand. By placing him in the position of either losing his life or defending it, Jesus would be forced to act – to take up arms against Rome and begin the revolution. The second theory is more pragmatic. Seeing Jesus frittering away the little advantage he had, Judas concluded that his man was not the Messiah, after all. In anger and disgust, therefore, Judas washed his hands of Jesus by betraying him.

Whatever theory one chooses, the results are the same. Jesus was not acting according to Judas' plan! This was the logical time to mobilize the people and lead the revolution. And Jesus was not doing what the Jewish Law, the prophets and the logic of Judas said he must do to take advantage of this critical moment. From Judas' perspective, Jesus had betrayed the trust Israel had invested in him. Jesus had betrayed the Messianic plan. That was an indication that he was not the Messiah after all. So for that misrepresentation of himself, Jesus deserved to die! If Jesus would choose to betray Israel's trust in him, then he must be betrayed in return!

What Judas little realized was that, in his betrayal of Jesus, Judas was betraying his own soul. Closed to what Jesus had actually taught and practiced over their three years together, Judas had set himself up for the destruction of his own soul. And that destruction cost Judas his life.

But if the dream of God's shalom kingdom would become reality upon the earth, the Church still needed someone to give form and substance to that dream. If not Judas, who would that person be?

The disciples, gathered together, selected a man named Matthias. But God chose a Jewish Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus – the apostle who later called himself “Paul”. After the disciples selected him, Matthias was never heard from again. But God met Paul on the road to Damascus, and proclaimed to the Church, “this man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before pagans and pagan kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

And chosen instrument was what Paul became. This man won more people to Christ, reached more cities and nations with the gospel, founded more churches, and influenced the political, economic and social transformation of more of the Roman Empire than any other disciple. But Paul’s greatest long-term contribution to Christianity was his authorship of twelve books, written to churches and individuals. Those books present one of the most consistent, rationale and logically developed systems of belief that the Christian Church has ever seen. And every Christian has been radically influenced by that system of belief. Paul became the mind of the Christian church – the mind that Judas had originally been chosen to be!

Psalm 1 contrasts two types of people – those chosen by God to be faithful to the Law, and those who choose to reject it.

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper” (vss. 1-3).

The psalm begins by reflecting upon those people who chose to embrace God and follow God’s Law. They are “happy” because they both deliberately choose to avoid the way of the wicked and consciously and continuously choose God’s way. These faithful ones are likened to trees drawing their nourishment from a nearby stream. As followers of Yahweh, they are focused on receiving nourishment from God on a continuing basis, and are totally centered on living both their private and their public life in obedience to a Law that requires acts of justice, the equitable sharing of one’s wealth and the centering of one’s life in the worship and service of God. For when one continues to be spiritually nourished, he or she is building the inner resources that will be used in their living justly in the world!

But there is another kind of “Judean”. “The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (vss. 4-6).

The first thing to keep in mind is that the author is not writing about a heathen person who worships another god than Yahweh. Instead, the psalmist looks at Hebrew people who do not follow the Law and live their lives for their own ends. They may believe in Yahweh, but they actually live their lives choosing to act unjustly, exploitatively and oppressively and thus deny God in their actions.

It is intriguing what the Psalmist writes about this person. He is “like chaff that the wind drives away”. It is as if he does not exist! He is “not so” (that is, he is not to even be noticed). In other words, the actions “of the wicked” end up ostracizing him from the Jewish community. And not only do the people ignore him; God ignores him as well. “The wicked will not stand in the judgment”. It is not that he will be judged negatively for his actions; it is that he will be eliminated from any relationship with God, even the relationship of judge to criminal, for he is not worthy of judgment. He is a “no-person”! Thus, “the way of that wicked one will perish”!

I John 5:9-13. John writes, “If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (I Jn. 5:9-13).

Jesus’ life, ministry, teachings, death and resurrection all are testimony to us of God’s intent for humanity and society. “God has meant us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they repose in him”⁴. There are only two ways to respond to the testimony of Christ regarding God’s embrace of us. We will either respond by embracing the One who embraces us, or we will reject it. If we embrace him, we testify by that embrace that we have been chosen by God and have eternal life. If we reject that good news, that action on our part demonstrates God’s rejection of us; we have become a liar and we “do not have life”.

This is the eternal decision before us all – to accept that God already accepts us, or to reject it. It is evident that this author, John, believes that those who are reading this letter believe that God has chosen them and have confirmed that choice by their choice of Christ (note, for example, how much John uses the words, “us” and “you” – that is, “you-all”).

But that was not the choice of Judas, or those who follow in the way of Judas. Judas lived in the very presence of the Son of God for three years and yet could not perceive that here was his Savior and Lord. And the reason why was that Judas was so fixated upon his own agenda for Israel, for the world, for himself – and consequently, for Jesus and for God – that he could not be open to discerning what God was doing in his very midst! In the words of the author of this epistle, Judas and those who follow him did not “believe in the testimony” that Jesus brought, and therefore – though in Jesus’ presence – never experienced “life” in him!

John is concerned that those who hear this letter read to them do receive life in the name of Christ. He states quite clearly his purpose, both in wiring this letter and in his very ministry. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13; cf. John 20:30-31). Whereas John’s Gospel was written to convince people to embrace Jesus as their savior and Lord, this letter was written to assure those who already believed that they were truly in a right relationship with God. And the reason why John could assure them that they were in a right relationship was because, in the final analysis, the

⁴ St. Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1951), p. 1.

sustaining of that relationship depended not on the consistency or steadfastness of their faith, but depended upon the surety and faithfulness of God.

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