

March 22 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

Betrayal – the Sin that Cuts Deepest

Mark 14:10-11, 43-39

I am going to begin with a question: Who has betrayed you? We either know our betrayer right off or we haven't experienced the pain of betrayal. That is the power betrayal has to hurt us. Synonyms for betrayal include: dishonesty, treachery, deception, double-crossing and unfaithfulness. Authors often write about betrayal. Here is one from the famous poet William Blake: It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.

The reason betrayal cuts so deep is that it comes from those we love. Betrayal only happens close to home. We need to remember that Jesus chose every one of his disciples. He called them by name. He chose his communal family with deliberation and understanding of their gifts. He chose Judas because Judas cared about the details of money and because he had a passion for the Messiah. Judas was given great responsibility. We all know what it means to trust the ones who care for our treasury. They are chosen because they are faithful, accountable, and honest. Judas was all of these things.

Judas isn't the lone betrayer in the Bible. Biblical stories of betrayal abound. There is Samson who was betrayed by his beloved Delilah, Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers, King David betraying his friend by sleeping with his wife and then having him killed and later being betrayed by his own son Absalom who tries to take the throne from him. All of this goes to show that betrayal is a part of our experience. We have all experienced the hurt of family, friends, and/or co-workers acting out of selfish motives, greed, or other reasons and it has destroyed our trust and it hurts.

Sometimes we betray ourselves. We have all read stories where people proclaim publicly one set of values and we then find out they are acting in very different ways in private. This can be the preacher who is caught in adultery, or the newsman caught in a lie, or the person running a committee who proclaims she wants to hear everyone's

opinion but then acts in a way to shut down all conversation. All of these and more are ways people betray themselves, acting dishonestly.

Whether we are betrayed or betray our own sense of integrity the results are devastating. Judas was one of the inner band of disciples. Forever people have tried to figure out what would motivate him to do such a thing as betray Jesus. Was it for the money? Was it to push Jesus into a revolution? Was it because he was angry that Jesus was not becoming the Messiah he had expected and now saw years of his life as being wasted? All are possible motives. When we are betrayed we want to have rational explanations. We want ways to get our minds wrapped around the why. But often there are no real explanations, at least explanations which make sense to us. The answers given only justify, in the betrayer's mind, their actions. One thing is sure. This kind of thing hurts. It is a pain that doesn't go away. We may forgive and move on but we can never quite forget. When someone we love and care about abuses our trust it injures the heart. That is why it is easier to forgive an enemy instead of a friend. Being betrayed is a part of life. But the greater question is, "What do we do with our betrayers?"

Do we live in the land of anger and distrust or do we forgive them? Now since we are in church we know the correct answer is, "Forgive them." But we know that is hard to do. The words, "hurt me once, shame on you, hurt me twice, shame on me" are often burned into our psyche. We put up walls of anger and fear, keeping emotional and often physical distances between us and our betrayers because we remember the pain and don't want to be hurt again. It is hard to move beyond living in that waste land of anger and distrust.

How do we do it? First we have to release the past and admit that you will never fix it, get vindication or likely understand the actions of your betrayer. As long as we keep replaying those old tapes we will never get better. It is the equivalent of spiritually picking the scab off of a wound. We know in medicine that if you keep picking at a sore it will not heal for a long time and the scar that is left will be more distinct. The same is true with our spiritual wounds. Keep bringing it up in your mind thinking about your hurt feelings and you will never allow any form of healing to happen. But we need to hear the good news. Healing is a possibility. As I said, we may never be able to forget the act of

betrayal but we can move beyond it and not let it dominate or control our lives and actions.

Secondly, as part of the path to forgiveness the writer of the book challenges us to pray for our betrayers. Now you might think, I could never do that but how about this prayer every time you remember the act of betrayal. "Lord, bless_____ and may he/she know your love." We can do this. We can ask God to bless even our enemies. The more times you pray this prayer of blessing the harder it is to keep those hard walls of anger and distrust erected in your life between you and them. This is why what Jesus asks is so counter cultural. The world does not celebrate loving your enemies but it is what we are asked to do.

But here, I always need to add a cautionary word. We have to be safe. Sometimes those who betrayed us also abused us. We don't have to be in situations with them where they can cause us harm, even if they are family. Keeping safe distances is sometimes necessary. But we have to do it for safety reasons not because we are angry at them and don't want to deal with them.

Beyond praying for others we need to pray for ourselves. When we are feeling the early pain and hurt of betrayal we might need to pray, "God, help me forgive the one who has hurt me." Later you might pray, "Lord release me from the bitterness and anger I am feeling." Even later you might pray, "Lord help me to look to the future and leave this behind me."

Our author ends this chapter: "We need to ask God to heal us and our betrayer. The two work in tandem." We cannot be healed until we ask God to heal the one who hurt us. It might cause them to change and it may not but we will be changed.

In closing let me share briefly a journey I went through of betrayal and forgiveness. I was in seminary and working for a church as their youth leader. I was hired for a year and at the end of that year had decided that I didn't want my contract renewed. I decided to apply to serve a small church while continuing my education. The senior pastor learned about my application and was hurt that I did not get his permission before applying and so used his considerable influence in the annual conference to

make sure I was not given an appointment to a church. I was hurt at this betrayal. Because of it I made the decision, with Jenny, to take a different direction. I left school for a year to serve as a full time intern in a different state and then we decided to change schools to finish my education. For a while all I could focus on was my hurt and betrayal. In a class I was challenged to pray a prayer of blessing for someone who hurt me. So I began to pray for God to bless this pastor. Things didn't change overnight but I found it harder and harder to be angry with him as I was asking God to bless him. In letting go of the anger I began to celebrate the things this act of betrayal had done for me. We loved our intern year. Getting married weeks before starting graduate school had not allowed us much time to enjoy life. That year was a joy, like an extended honeymoon. The school I transferred to fit me much better. I was offered two small churches to serve and they were a blessing. I can only imagine what life might have been like if we had continued on where I first was. As I began to celebrate, the pain eased more. Then I began to have compassion for this pastor. Obviously he had serious issues of his own if he decided it was necessary to block my appointment just because I had not asked him to help. I came to see that he had a very delicate ego. I came to truly feel sorry for him. I never met him again as we lived thousands of miles apart but even though I remember the act of betrayal and how it hurt, there is no pain. God healed me in leading me to pray for the one who betrayed.

Yes, this kind of view of how to deal with one who has betrayed you it is counter cultural but also life giving. May we live into this vision. This is why what we are called to do is so subversive. But it is life giving.