

Jackie McNeil  
First UCC 1/16/22  
John 21: 15-17  
MLK Weekend

As I stand here today, I am very aware of two things. One is that I'm new here, and most of you don't know me yet, or know me well. And two is that this is our first all-virtual service together – and the first for this church in many months. It's hard to be apart again. So before I begin, I want you to imagine with me an old-fashioned dinner bell – calling you in from wherever you are – into warmth, into hospitality, into nourishment and community. And we need to be called in, because this is a difficult sermon. A challenging one.

On this Racial Justice Sunday, this is a sermon by and for white folks about racism. Too often we allow, or require, people of color to do the heavy lifting over racism – when it's really a system that white people created, sustained and benefit from. But we also have a lot of power to dismantle it if we have the will. So let us call each other in.

I'm here to talk with you today about betrayal. It is woven throughout the scriptures, of course. Genesis alone tells of Cain killing his brother Abel, Jacob stealing Esau's birthright, and Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery. That's a lot of sibling rivalry! But I want to focus on the betrayal of the disciples. The most obvious, of course, is Judas.

Matthew 26 tells us: <sup>14</sup>Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests <sup>15</sup>and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. <sup>16</sup>And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him." The other disciples apparently didn't know about the plan, but Jesus did. Jesus called out Judas at the Last Supper and later surrendered to his fate saying: "Do what you are here to do." Yes, we are all familiar with the story of Judas' betrayal.

But the other disciples betrayed Jesus too. No, they didn't sell Jesus out, nor turn him over to the authorities. But as he prayed over his fate that long night at Gethsemane, they (Peter, James & John) fell asleep, again and again, leaving him to face it alone. After his arrest,

Peter repeatedly denied knowing him. After the resurrection, they refused to believe those who told them of the miracle, especially Thomas who needed to see the wounds with his own eyes. And there were other betrayals before Jesus' death – like the way they argued on the road to Capernaum over which one of them was the greatest, or refused to listen when he foretold his own death. At one point, Jesus became so frustrated with them that he called them “a faithless generation.”

Yes, these betrayals vary quite a bit in kind and severity. Perhaps the word “betrayal” feels too heavy, and synonyms like “disloyalty” or “unfaithfulness” would feel better. But when you look at the long arc of the story, there is a full spectrum of faith – as they drop their nets and follow Jesus – and there is a full spectrum of betrayal.

And what I've come to tell you today is that this full spectrum – this is also what we white people have done to people of color. We have betrayed – we continue to betray – our siblings in a myriad of ways. We are “a faithless generation,” and it's time to really acknowledge it.

Judas is easy to identify. Judas is the white supremacy which created plantation slavery and Jim Crow, which dresses in white hoods or carries torches in Charlottesville. Judas is Derek Chauvin slowly and deliberately crushing the life out of George Floyd. And Judas is all of the videos of white people calling the police because they noticed an African-American in their neighborhood, or a Latinx person in a public park, or a Muslim in a store.

I'm guessing that all of you have known a Judas in your lives, but I don't believe that anyone in this church is a Judas. And if racism was all about Judas, we'd all have clean consciences, right? But it's not. One of the most important lessons in the UCC's curriculum on White Privilege is that we must stop thinking of racism as individual acts of hate perpetuated by individual white people against people of color. It is so much bigger and so much more pervasive than that. It is part of the institutions we use every day. So let's look at the other betrayals.

Because we white folks, like the disciples, have also slept through many of the trials faced by people of color – because our lives were busy or we just didn't realize how bad things were. How many times have we heard of African-Americans been pulled over for driving while

black? And then why are we shocked to see that Black men are incarcerated at a rate 5x that of white men?

We, like Thomas, have also denied the truth of racism and doubted our siblings of color when they told us about it, unless we saw it with our own eyes. We say things like “it’s not that bad,” or “I’m sure that was an isolated incident.” People said that about Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown, and Philando Castile, and Terrence Crutcher, and Sandra Bland, and Tamir Rice, and Alton Sterling, and Walter Scott, and Eric Garner, and Breonna Taylor, and Daunte Wright, and Ahmaud Arbery, and Kokou Christopher Fiafonou ... and so many others, all “isolated incidents.” We, like Thomas, have doubted.

And, then there’s the form of betrayal that belongs mostly to white liberals – we have competed with each other – “I’m more ‘woke’ than they are,” or “I don’t have a racist bone in my body.” But bones are never racist, and these statements (or thoughts) only serve to make the issue about us, and not about the lived experiences of Black & Brown folks.

You see, when we expand the lens, when we don’t look at betrayal as an all or nothing experience – we have all participated in some form of this. We didn’t create this racist system, but we all benefit from it.

But there is no time for white guilt or white fragility. Because the Judases of the world are feeling empowered, emboldened. They are engaging in violence in the streets and they are implementing policy in statehouses – attacking public education, voting rights and other pillars of our democratic society. They are teaming up with empire to destroy communities of color, and **they are using our faith to justify it all**. We’ve seen it more clearly over the last few years ... Brown families separated and caged at the border. Black men gunned down in our streets. Innocent blood shed for hatred, for profit. And when lives are being destroyed all around us, we might be tempted to excuse those “lesser betrayals,” but you know that Dr. Martin Luther King didn’t.

His *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* challenges white moderates for not stepping up, for asking the Black community to wait, to go slowly, to ask nicely. In other words, he called out the “lesser betrayals.” Even more so, he denounced the church, writing:

*So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed*

*by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent ... sanction of things as they are.*

*But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.*

He wrote that in 1963. Three years before I was born. And at this point you're probably wishing I had stuck to his "I have a dream" speech.

But the thing is we're not that church. And we don't have to be that church. In fact, we could be, are called to be a very different church. And right now, teams are working to make sure that we live into that calling – working on a land acknowledgement statement, an immigrant welcoming covenant, and a racial justice covenant. But a covenant cannot be just words on paper. It can't just be a good idea, we must crave it. It must become who we are. It must become boots on the ground, and souls to the polls, and putting our money where our mouth is. And it must become constant self-education and vigilance.

You see, anti-racism teachers talk about our society as a lake or a sea of racism – it's the water in which we all swim, and though we didn't create it, those of us who are white benefit from it, and by our many betrayals, we perpetuate it. We don't have to pay attention to it, or even notice it. But as long as we are content to swim and ignore the water, we continue the betrayal.

Can we wish it away? No, nor can we dream it away, but we can work it away. Racism is socially constructed so it can be socially de-constructed. But that takes work. We must become aware of our whiteness – of the privilege and the power that comes with this accident of birth. We must become aware of the water around us. We must acknowledge the betrayal and the consequences of it. Where we have been asleep, we must wake up and stay awake. Where we have doubted, we must believe & offer the benefit of the doubt. Where we have denied reality, we must loudly affirm it. We must center the lived experience of people of color by de-centering ourselves. And we must be willing to be true disciples – to spread the word.

In that same letter, Dr. King honored those faith leaders who did challenge the status quo, saying "Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of

the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.”

Imagine if we became that church ... that tunnel of hope. Now, I am not here to negate or minimize all of the work that we’ve already done, as individuals or as a church. It’s part of what drew us to this c-c-c-o-l-d place.

But I know that it’s easy to reflect on King’s “I have a dream” speech this weekend, because it’s easy to dream, and even easier to listen to someone else dream. But really absorbing the challenge of anti-racism work, or learning to be true allies, that’s much harder. It’s going to demand things of us. It’s going to make us all uncomfortable.

And here let me return, finally, to our scripture for today. After all of the betrayal, especially by Peter, Jesus turns to him and asks, three times, “Do you love me?” Peter responds “You know that I love you.” And Jesus says “Feed my sheep.”

Peter – who fell asleep, who denied Jesus, who doubted the resurrection – that Peter ...

“Do you love me? Feed my sheep.”

“Do you love me? Feed my sheep.”

“Do you love me? Feed my sheep.”

Jesus did not say “It’s okay, Peter.” It’s okay that you fell asleep; it’s okay that you denied me three times; it’s okay that you have betrayed me over and over again. He does not negate the earlier behavior, nor does he say “But that was a long time ago. Let it go!”

What he says, three times, is if you love me, feed my sheep. If you love me, make it right. If you love me, do the work. Jesus doesn’t call Peter out ... he calls him in. Into the work.

And he says this, of course, to Simon Peter – the rock on whom the church is built. We, as the church, as the Body of Christ, are also called into the work.

So why should we make this racial justice covenant? Why should we commit ourselves to this work?

There are a thousand reasons. Because we live life more fully when we are open to all experiences; because we are all enriched by the diversity around us; because we want to be good disciples.

But mostly because we have the opportunity in front of us to redeem our ancestors and unburden our children. Imagine that? Imagine if we could hand our children and grandchildren a world without racism...

That is a dream worth working for.

-----