

Saving Judas

The 7th Sunday of Easter, Year B: John 17.6-19

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One of my most enjoyable reads in quite a while is *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* by George Saunders. It's a condensed version of a class he's taught at Syracuse for more than 20 years on the Russian short story. And before your eyes glaze the rest of the way over, hear me out. If you're imagining a ponderous academic tome written by some tweedy, pipe smoking professorial bore, you should know that one of George's descriptions — you really do get the feeling he'd want you to call him George — you should know that one of his most vivid descriptions of what makes a good story work involves a favorite Hot Wheels set he had as a kid.

I had one too, with the floppy lengths of orange track that linked up with those little plastic tongue depressor thingys. Which allowed me to exercise my gifts in both highway engineering *and* construction, even though my imaginary day job was world champion race car driver. But George says his set had little battery operated "gas stations." And inside each station was a pair of spinning rubber wheels that would grab a Hot Wheels car and shoot it out the other side. I never saw such a thing. But the thought of it fills the 6-year-old in me with envy even today. Especially when George said that if he spaced the gas stations just so, he could get a car started before he left for school and it would still be zipping around the track when he got home.

See? Not all literary critics are created equally dull.

George Saunders says a good story works like his Hot Wheels set did. The reader is the little car, and the writer has to place gas stations of meaning or entertainment or surprise at the right intervals, or else the reader runs out of juice and interest and starts scrolling through Instagram. Makes some sense, doesn't it?

Sermons work the same way, I'm afraid. I mean, you'll stay with a preacher on a tangent about Hot Wheels for only so long before you decide the answer to "Where in the world is this going?" is "Nowhere" and start scrolling through Instagram.

But that little Hot Wheels metaphor actually helped me better understand how Holy Scripture works as well. And not because I think the Bible is all fiction. All compelling stories, whether they actually happened or not, include the right details in the right places, don't they? And if you're reading something truly great, something that stays so alive that generations of readers have handed it down with reverence and awe, like a Chekhov story or the gospel of John, you and I should assume that there's a reason for every last thing that's included, no matter how confusing or offensive or strange. To trust scripture is not to withhold or suppress the difficult questions that arise in us when we read it. But to trust scripture is to believe that there must be some kind of wisdom latent even in the parts that bewilder or infuriate us. The best stories, after all, will never leave a reader settled safely in the place where she was when the story began.

My purpose here has been, first, to take a step back and consider what makes a powerful story work, and to suggest that there won't be a detail or a character unworthy of our attention in a great one. And then, from here, to look squarely at one character in John's gospel. An apostle. But not one of those Jesus says he guarded and protected. The "one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled." Judas Iscariot. The betrayer. The heartbreaking fact that close to the heart of Jesus's story was this tragic and unfaithful friend.

Judas has gotten plenty of attention across the centuries. In Dante's *Inferno*, he spends all eternity in the lowest circle of hell. More specifically, he spends it in one of Lucifer's three mouths, the other two chomping on Cassius and Brutus, the assassins of Julius Caesar. Vivid stuff there. It's not so hard to see how that little gas station keeps a story moving forward. Vengeance on bad guys has fueled blockbusters for centuries, it seems. It also makes you wonder whether Dante had experienced a little betrayal himself and was working out some of his own frustrations on the page.

There was also a Gnostic Gospel of Judas, probably written in the later 200s, in which Jesus laughs at his disciples while they're praying, which hurts their feelings and then makes them really angry. Only Judas keeps his cool, and Jesus pulls him aside and unveils the mysteries of the kingdom, just to him.

I'm guessing most of us would be more open to the idea of this Gnostic Judas — a misunderstood Judas who was actually in cahoots with Jesus, a good guy who got a bad rap — rather than Lucifer's everlasting snack.

But we're not reading either of those accounts today. They are not our scriptures. And that difficult comment in the gospel of John about Judas having been destined to be lost actually sits very much in the space between these two extremes. It really does. So, don't explain away the treachery of Judas. And don't put him in the mouth of Lucifer in your imagination. Because neither of these is our story.

To anyone who's read the gospels, it's startling to hear Jesus say that he protected all his disciples but one. Back in John chapter 10, Jesus says he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, right? Which echoes the parable we love over in Matthew and Luke in which a shepherd abandons 99 sheep in search of the one who has wandered off. What gives?

Well, what we might consider first is that Dante's version and the Gnostic Judas relieve a tension that we have to wrestle with in the Biblical Judas. If Judas simply gets what he had coming, well...I'm sorry. What's the gospel again? That we all get what we have coming to us? I don't think so. The gospel is our redemption by God's grace through the cross from that world of violent retribution. The ways of that world are what the way of Jesus refutes.

But if Judas was actually a good guy who was just misunderstood, the story of our redemption loses something else. It no longer includes the kind of betrayal that really happens in this world. And in some ways, such a betrayal really can be a culmination of all sorts of forces that break our lives and our world apart. There are questions of power and money and violence and loyalty and so much more wrapped up in the character of Judas. And he wasn't just one of the hundred sheep in Jesus's fold. He was one of the twelve closest people to Jesus. One who, according to Matthew, felt remorse, tried to give the blood money back, and, when he failed, took his own life.

So, when John says Judas was lost, there was no need to bring the afterlife into it. Judas is the very image of lostness, dying in despair, all alone, after betraying a friend to his death.

It's hard to sit with this image. Especially if you've lost a friend or loved one to such despair. But, friends, it may be that if you have lost someone dear to you whose life got away from him, someone who got caught and just couldn't find the way out, someone who hurt and even betrayed the people closest to him on his way down... Well, it may be only more critical to hear that Jesus's story includes just such a damaged and damaging friend. Because what we also know is that the end of Judas is not the end of this story. Redemption is. Redemption by way of a self-giving love so forceful, we come to wonder whether there's anything in all the cosmos, human

betrayals and betrayers very much included from the very beginning, that won't ultimately be caught up within it.

Today we baptize a child. And I know Locke and Reed are just so happy to have a baptismal sermon to fold up and tuck into Winnie's keepsakes that references Judas in the jaws of a three headed Lucifer. I do what I can.

But, friends, it's for the likes of Winnie, too, that we trust Jesus enough to follow his story where it takes us.

In a moment, her parents and godparents will make baptismal promises on her behalf. And they will begin with three renunciations. Renunciation of Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. Renunciation of evil powers that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. And renunciation of sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. In other words, what we renounce is everything in this world and in us that destroyed Jesus's friend Judas, and that destroyed other lives through his. We don't pretend that Winnie will be spared from those forces. She's already been exposed. Even in us, I'm afraid.

But we don't only renounce. We also turn. We turn to Jesus and accept him, not these other forces, as our savior. We place our trust, not in the ways of violence and vengeance, but in his grace and his love. And we promise to follow him and his story wherever it leads us. To be a community that surrounds Winnie with this story and lives as best we can into the way of self giving love that Jesus showed us to the end.

Because even allowing the tragic figure of Judas to remain tragic, even acknowledging his utter lostness, does not deny a savior who would leave 99 sheep in the fold and crash into the thicket after a lost one who had wandered away. Quite the opposite, in fact. To name Judas as truly lost is to name him as *precisely* the one Jesus runs after all the way to Easter. And each aspect of Judas's lostness, and of ours — greed, betrayal, hopelessness, regret — in this story each of these ultimately becomes, not just a failure, but one more reason for Jesus to run after us. For it is not in any form of human lostness, but in the one who runs after the lost one, that the scriptures are most deeply fulfilled, even today.