

Maundy Thursday
April 6, 2023
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"The Devil made me do it" is surely on the short list of least convincing excuses to a modern Episcopalian. First of all, especially if we're upstanding American types, we value personal responsibility and individual freedom, both of which seem to be suspended if a devil is to blame for some bad thing I couldn't help but do. Secondly, we don't have much use for devils in general. Maybe we've found ways to rehabilitate the concept of God, whom we once may have thought of as a stern, grey bearded guy on a throne in the clouds. Some of us might even believe in angelic forces of a sort. But few of us have bothered to update the image of that pitchfork-wielding demon in a red suit and horns. As a result, we may have skipped over the sentence in tonight's gospel lesson about the devil having "already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him." Surely it's just so much premodern nonsense. But is it? Is it only nonsense or could it play a useful part in this story? And maybe even in ours?

Most religious traditions have ways of talking about how humans are not free, or at least not as free as we think we are. Fate or kismet or predestination are ways of saying we are bit players in a drama we didn't write the script for. Versions of these concepts are alive and well among people with no use for God or religion as well. It turns out that free will is even harder for a modern physicist or philosopher to account for than it was for St. Augustine or John Calvin. Many of them would say that your decision last Friday to order chicken hash and a waffle instead of fish pudding may have felt like a free choice, but it was really just one tiny, recent event in a cosmic chain reaction that stretches back to the Big Bang. Which does, I suppose, make some sense with regard to fish pudding. Isn't it easier to imagine it evolving over time like some exotic deep-sea creature rather than being the result of a free and rational human turning to her sous chef once upon a Thursday and saying, "Hey, what if we made a pudding, but made it out of fish this time?!" I promise that's the last fish pudding joke of 2023.

Most of us come down somewhere in the middle with regard to free will. There's a whole lot in this life we do not get to choose, but there's a small but meaningful sliver of life in which we do seem free to make choices. Problems arise when we get confused about which actions arise from the fact that we're free and which ones arise from the fact that we're not.

I've come to read that line about a devil putting betrayal into the heart of Judas as a small kindness on the part of the writer of John. That's a strange thing to say, I know. John is the gospeler who interrupts his own story over and over again when Judas enters a scene to remind us that he's a very bad egg. Saying the devil entered his heart initially sounds like another explanation of Judas's badness. But perhaps it's a way of telling us that the sources of Judas's betrayal are a mystery to us. Judas didn't decide to betray his friend.

Something entered him that was foreign to him. His treachery was not a choice, or at least it wasn't only a choice.

This matters because when evil happens, I want to understand it so I can contain it. And when evil happens, I also want to balance things back out. I want the moral score to be settled, if not in terms of pain and suffering on the part of the perpetrator, at least in terms of guilt and shame at his failure. I want someone to blame and hold responsible. Don't you? This can feel like our moral obligation to the universe.

But that's not what happens in this story, is it? That's not what happens at all.

The word "Maundy" is related to "mandate" and "commandment." And Jesus did command something of his disciples at the Last Supper as if they and we have some choices to make in this life, even in the face of evil we don't understand. But the commandment was not, "Judases must be punished." It wasn't even, "Don't be a Judas yourself." Nor did he say, "Don't trust anyone. Your betrayer could be sitting right beside you at dinner with your closest friends." Any of those commands would have made a kind of sense. But the new commandment Jesus gives us is to love. "Just as I have loved you," he says, "you also should love one another."

"Fine, Jesus," we might say. "But this betrayal — which, by the way, will become the archetypal sin by which all other sins are measured for the next 2,000 years or more — surely this is a situation that requires what we call 'tough love.' Judas needs to be taught a lesson." To which Jesus says, "Call it what you want. But here's what the love I'm talking about looks like." Then he tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of his friends. He said he wanted us to love each other in ways that are visible, like this ordinary, vulnerable, humble act of service. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The devil put betrayal into Judas's heart. In response, Jesus commands us to choose love.

So, here is a question the story still seems to press upon us. What if we were humbler about the sources of evil and clearer about the commandment to love? What would change?

I have learned so much from the people who come to Calvary early each Sunday morning to give and receive food and clothing and friendship and dignity and lots more besides. I'm not sure I've ever witnessed a more beautiful Maundy Thursday scene than when med school students come once a month to tend to the beat up and misshapen feet of people who sleep outside and walk wherever they go. But on rare occasions we do have to draw additional boundaries to keep people safe. If someone acts out in a way that could be dangerous to others, at some point we will not just ask them to stop. We tell them they are not allowed to be here until we know they will behave differently.

But it's only by the light of the Last Supper that I see now that no one is ever punished in this process. Since there is nearly always conspicuous trauma or emotional instability at play, punishment doesn't even compute. There are no moral debts to be repaid when actions arise from an apparent possession by forces we do not understand. The question becomes simply whether allowing this person to be here makes it unsafe for that person

to be here. Which is actually a question of what love can allow. Or maybe what protection love must afford.

Perhaps a challenge at the heart of the Maundy Thursday story to all of us is whether we might be humbler about the sources of evil and clearer about the commandment to love in all our relationships and dealings in this world.

Over these next three days, as we enter the depths of Christ's passion together, only one person will be punished. Jesus will be punished by the Roman Empire, which believed itself to be the keeper of the known world's moral order. Empires are never humble about the sources of evil. They know the sins of their enemies and precisely who must pay precisely what price.

But tonight, you and I are being called to another way by the Punished One himself. We're being called to the strange way of love. Visible love that doesn't keep score and wonders what it looks like in this moment to serve. Whether it's toward someone who epitomizes all betrayers and everything that's wrong with the world to us, or the ordinary enemies of our day to day lives — the ones who set the little wind-up toys of scorn and vengeance inside us hopping — our call may be to meet all of these with a little less blame and judgment and thirst for punishment, and with a little more curiosity and compassion and maybe even wonder at what devil must have entered them to make them so. It may even be that if we lose a little confidence in their freedom to be someone other than who they are, something inside us may wriggle free enough to choose love.