

Series: The Upper Room Discourse

John 13:21-30

An appeal to a friend

by Scott Grant

A sick dog

Charlie Cooke, my high school basketball coach, would begin every season with an introductory talk that was sprinkled with anecdotes from his colorful 30-year coaching history. One anecdote was used to illustrate his axiom, "Boys, I want you to tell me the truth."

Charlie told a long, elaborate story about a boy whom he had coached 15 years earlier who was the best player on that team. A week prior to the big game, the coach decided to incorporate a new offensive scheme. But the star player didn't show up to practice. Charlie was concerned and telephoned the player, but there was no answer. The player didn't appear at either school or practice all that week, despite the coach's best efforts to locate him. The big game came and went, and the next week the player reappeared at school. Charlie asked him what happened.

As Charlie told the story, we current players, all wide-eyed innocents, were hooked, waiting for the dramatic conclusion, having long forgotten what point the story was supposed to illustrate. Charlie milked it, finally quoting the star player's dramatic explanation: "Mr. Cooke, ... my dog was sick." Then Charlie was silent before his breathless and puzzled audience. Finally someone started laughing. The rest of us joined in as it dawned on us that Charlie understood the player's explanation to be a fabrication. As the laughter died down Charlie told us, "To this day I don't know what the real reason is, but boys, I want you to tell me the truth."

In the passage before us today, Jesus offers Judas repeated and ever-intensifying opportunities to face the truth - the hidden truth that he is planning to betray his friend.

The appeal of truth

John 13:21-24:

(21) When Jesus had said this, he became troubled in spirit and testified and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray me." (22) The disciples began looking at one another, at a loss to know of which one he was speaking. (23) There was reclining on Jesus' breast one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. (24) Simon Peter therefore gestured to him, "Tell us who it is of whom he is speaking."

Jesus became troubled after he said "this," or literally, "these things," which would be the things recorded in verse 20: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me." He was troubled because he knew that one wasn't receiving him or the Father. This information troubles Jesus because he is facing the agony of betrayal, but also because he is grieving for his friend Judas. The same word for "troubled" is also used in John 11:33, when Jesus was troubled when seeing the grief of others in response to the death of Lazarus. So Jesus is troubled in an outward-looking sense for Judas, who is on the brink of throwing life away.

That raises the question, "Why did Judas betray Jesus?" Scripture isn't specific. In John 12:6, John says that Judas pilfered funds from the group's money box. It's clear from this that he looked not to love Jesus but to use him. Perhaps like many, he was expecting the Messiah to establish a political kingdom on earth in which he hoped to play a leading role. Whatever the specific reason, Jesus somehow did not meet Judas'

Knowing that Judas was not receiving him, Jesus "testified," a word drawn from the legal sphere that calls attention to the truth. Jesus testifies that one not only won't receive him but will betray him. Yet he doesn't single out Judas. This has the effect of making an appeal to Judas without exposing him to shame or retribution. The appeal is to face the truth.

Judas has lived a life of deceit. We know he was secretly stealing funds and was secretly planning to betray Jesus, all the while pretending to be a faithful disciple. Someone who engages in deceiving others has always first deceived himself or herself into thinking that deceit is profitable. Then deceit begets more deceit, which is necessary to cover up the original deceit. As deceit grows in the heart, truth gets more and more distant, and reality is redefined.

Judas has swallowed large doses of poisonous error. He has believed the lie: "You'll be better off if you betray Jesus." He redefines reality. The only antidote to the error is the truth, which Jesus is holding out for his dear friend. The truth is that Judas was in the process of betraying Jesus. Perhaps Judas had deceived himself to the point that he didn't think he would follow through with his scheme or that his scheme was not an act of betrayal. In verse 22 John says the disciples didn't know who Jesus was talking about. Quite possibly, Judas was among them.

In Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," Raskolnikov, a destitute college dropout, fantasizes about killing a pawnbroker and stealing her valuables. "In spite of all his agonizing inner struggles," Dostoyevsky writes, "he could not in all this time believe for one moment in the carrying out of his plans." He was wrong. His self-deceit continued to the point that he believed that his plan, if executed, was "not a crime." So he did it.

Judas needed to admit the truth, first to himself and then to Jesus, "Yes, I am the one." Jesus offers him that chance, without bullying or shaming. But the appeal is met with silence.

What about the secrets we harbor? We may even be unaware of them, having constructed a fence of deceit around them so that not even we can see the truth. The truth seems threatening, but it isn't. Reality is always better than fantasy, because God, who is beautiful, dwells in reality. There will be times in our lives when Jesus pulls up a chair in intimate fellowship, pleading with us, "Dear friend, please face the truth."

None of the disciples knew who Jesus was talking about. At least two implications can be drawn from this. First, Judas acted well, so that none of the others caught on. Second, Jesus, though he was on to Judas, treated him no differently, loving him just as he loved the others.

John mentions a disciple who was reclining on Jesus' breast (*kolpos*). His identity remains a mystery until the end of the book, when John reveals this disciple to be none other than himself (John 21:24). In John 1:18, John says that the Son is in the bosom (*kolpos*) of the Father. John stands in the same relationship to Jesus as Jesus does to the Father. All of us, as disciples of Jesus, are in his breast, close to his heart, and therefore in the breast of the Father, intimately connected and approved.

In a reclined position at a meal, a person would lean on his left arm so that his right hand would be free to eat from the low-lying table. His head would be near the table with his feet facing away. This posture means that John must have been seated to the right of Jesus, allowing him to lean on Jesus' breast. The seat to the right of the host was reserved for a trusted friend.

John, knowing that he is a trusted friend of Jesus close to his heart, describes himself as being loved by Jesus. That means he himself knew Jesus loved him. He knew the truth of Jesus' love for him. He knew reality. For John, that made all the difference. It could have made all the difference for Judas, too.

As for Peter, he wants to know who the culprit is. Perhaps he's wondering, "Is it possible that it's me?" In the accounts of Matthew and Mark, the disciples respond to Jesus' statement that one of them would betray him with the words, "Surely, not I" (Matthew 26:22, Mark 14:19). Peter too may be moving toward the

truth. Unlike Judas, he wants to know the truth.

The text says that Peter gestured to the disciple who was leaning on Jesus' breast. It doesn't say that words were spoken. Peter was seated in view of John, who, being seated next to Jesus, could easily ask him. Perhaps Peter didn't ask Jesus himself because, though moving toward the truth, he was still afraid of it - afraid that it might be him.

Judas, of course, is terrified of it, but Jesus continues his appeal to his deceived friend.

The appeal of friendship

John 13:25-26:

(25) He, leaning back on Jesus' breast, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" (26) Jesus therefore answered, "That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him." So when he had dipped the morsel, he took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.

John follows Peter's instructions and asks Jesus. Evidently, this was a private conversation between John and Jesus, with the disciple leaning on his teacher's breast. Jesus continues to protect Judas from the scorn of the others, but he informs John in a roundabout way by identifying the traitor as the one to whom he will offer a morsel.

It was customary to show special honor to someone by dipping a choice morsel in a common bowl and offering it to him. Jesus was extending special friendship to Judas. And Jesus was close enough to Judas that he could simply hand him the morsel. Quite possibly, Judas was immediately to the left. He couldn't have been immediately to the right, because that's where John was seated. The seat to the left of the host was the seat of honor, even more so than the seat to the right. Whether Judas muscled his way into the seat or Jesus offered it to him, Jesus obviously didn't ask him to be seated someplace else. Jesus accepted Judas as an honored friend, and he extended an intimate gesture of friendship when he held out the morsel.

First, Jesus appeals to him by offering the opportunity to confront the truth of his self-destructive scheme. Now he appeals by offering the truth of his deep feelings of friendship.

Judas' collision course with the truth has reached its impact. The lie faces the truth, wreaking internal havoc. It is, quite literally, the moment of truth.

No matter how far we've wandered, Jesus beckons to us to confront the truth of our wayward ways and to return to the bosom of his friendship. Truth and love go together. The ultimate truth we need to face is that Jesus loves us. The friendship is always there. The arms are always open. The morsel is always extended. The appeal is not for us to straighten out the mess we've made of our lives or to conquer whatever sinful tendencies control us; the appeal is for us to accept his friendship. And that gives us the courage, when our moments of truth arrive, as they certainly will, to face the truth of our rejection of his friendship and return to him. No punishment is waiting. Only intimate friendship.

Brennan Manning envisions God putting it this way: "My point, little brother, is this: I expect more failure from you than you expect from yourself." If that's so, there's no reason to keep our distance.

Why does Jesus identify the traitor for John in such a roundabout way? Jesus is doing more than just identifying the traitor. He's telling John in particular, the one who understands himself to be loved by Jesus. If John understands himself to be loved, and he sees Jesus extending such love even to a traitor, how much greater would be his understanding of that love? Jesus opened his heart to John, and John saw nothing but love.

But what of Judas?

Rejection of truth and friendship

John 13:27-30:

(27) And after the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Jesus therefore said to him, "What you do, do quickly. (28) No one of those reclining at table knew for what purpose he had said this to him. (29) For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, "Buy the things we have need of for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. (30) And so after receiving the morsel he went out immediately. And it was night.

Jesus extends friendship to Judas in the substance of the choice morsel. Judas accepts the morsel. But does he accept the friendship? Obviously not, for he leaves the group for the Jewish leaders. When he accepted the morsel, then, he was still engaging in deception. This was peak deception, for he acted like an intimate friend when he was not. He faked it. Perhaps he was still deceiving himself, convincing himself that he wouldn't follow through with his plan or that his plan "wasn't a crime." All he needed to do was move toward the truth - refuse the morsel, walk away from the table, or tell Jesus of his plans. But he lied. In taking in the morsel, he communicated that he was taking in Jesus.

In truth, he was taking in someone else - Satan. John says that "after" the morsel, "then" Satan entered into him. Judas' acceptance of the morsel gave Satan the opening he needed. What was it about the taking of the morsel that opened the door? Nothing more than the lie. Satan's power is that of the lie. He is the father of lies (John 8:44) who directs legions of "deceitful spirits" (1 Timothy 4:1). He has no influence where truth is believed. As the Apostle Paul says, "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3). Satan's goal is to lead people away from Christ. His method is deception. Judas' concept of truth was completely distorted. The huge lie that imitated friendship gave Satan a huge opening.

The people of Israel often faked friendship with the Lord. The prophet Malachi chastised the priests for offering to the Lord blind, lame and sick animals and keeping the best for themselves. The Lord cried out, "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates that you might not uselessly kindle fire on my altar!" (Malachi 1:10). They pretended to worship the Lord, but in reality they were rejecting him. The Lord would rather have honest rejection than pretend friendship.

Perhaps Judas' final lie, and Satan's capitalizing on it, was the point of no return. Truth was out of sight. Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov reached that point, when "he felt that he no longer had any freedom of choice - that he had no alternative and that suddenly everything had been conclusively decided."

Jesus either understood the tactics of Satan so well that he knew that Judas' final act of deception would activate the enemy, or he recognized the influence of Satan in his friend's appearance. At any rate, it's because of Satan's appearance on the scene that Jesus tells Judas to get on with it. And with Satan's appearance, Jesus recognizes the final missed turning point on the collision course.

But why does he instruct Judas to do what he's doing quickly? Because Jesus wants to get on with something else - choice fellowship with his true intimates. The whole evening is about friendship. Even Jesus' appeal to Judas is one of friendship. The presence of a fake friend would detract from the fellowship of true friends. Jesus also wants to get on with choice fellowship with us, believers in him - his true friends.

The rest of the disciples didn't know the purpose of Jesus' instructions to Judas. Ten of the disciples were completely in the dark, which demonstrates once again how effectively deceitful Judas was. John would have been able to identify Judas as the traitor, but apparently he, too, didn't know specifically why Jesus said to Judas, "What you do, do quickly." John may have been in shock.

The two possible explanations that the disciples come up with both concern Judas' possession of the money box. The striking thing is that Jesus, who knew that Judas was planning his betrayal, still trusted him with the money box. Did it ever dawn on Judas, after he found out that Jesus was on to him, that Jesus trusted him with the money box? Probably not. The truth of Jesus' friendship was too threatening.

as the actions of Judas himself are concerned. The reason for Judas' departure is Jesus' instructions in verse 27 to act quickly. He obeys Jesus and leaves "immediately." He was living in the dark, refusing to expose himself to the light of the truth. Then Jesus shines the blinding light of the truth into his life, and he can't take it. He flees immediately to where he's more comfortable: into the darkness, into the night. "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Judas loved the darkness rather than the light.

Night has its day. "Darkness was over the surface of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). While all of Jerusalem, and even all the world, lies in darkness as Judas heads for the Jewish leaders, a light is still burning in an upper room. Jesus is enjoying fellowship with his 11 friends, the new community of God who would shine the light of the gospel "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

A fellowship meal

Jesus is calling with the truth, offering us a chance to agree with it - to agree that we've wandered from friendship with him and embraced friendship with the world, if that's the case. Perhaps we've deceived ourselves and don't even know it. But we can face the truth of our deception because Jesus is not only calling with the truth, he's beckoning with friendship. A robust fellowship meal awaits.

- SCG, 1995

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