

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
 "On Being Betrayed"
 March 16, 2008 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Spoken Meditation

What kind of promise lasts forever?
 What kind of trust cannot be broken?
 What kind of faith can endure every trial?

Everything is constantly changing,
 Arising and passing away,
 And I want to hold onto something.

I want some kind of security,
 A rain suit that will protect me from the downpour,
 A shelter that will withstand, hurricane and tornado;
 A fire to warm me on the coldest night.

Yet betrayal lurks in the woods, a hungry wolf watching me,
 Waiting for me to show a weakness to exploit.
 How can I open myself up, knowing the danger out there?
 How can I expose my vulnerability,
 and trust a greater source of protection will be there?

Oh, Spirit of Life and Love,
 Show me the truths that do indeed endure;
 Persuade me to trust your all-pervading presence;
 Build my confidence I can rely on you.

In every change, you are the one constant
 The only security that unites me with was is beyond me.

Betrayal cannot betray you
 As I cannot be separated from you
 Just as the crest of the wave
 Always remains an expression of the sea
 And the wolf's blood stained teeth
 are a paradoxical reminder of a greater belonging.

Reading

Selections from Mark Chapter 14:1-42, Matthew 26:47-56 and Luke 22:47-62

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him.

While Jesus was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke open the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

Then Judas ... went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb ... Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me--one who is eating with me." They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?"

(after their dinner) they went out to the Mount of Olives. "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' ... Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not. So help me," Jesus answered, "today--yes, tonight--before the rooster crows twice, you yourself will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

[Late that night in the Garden of Gethsemane] a crowd came up, and Judas was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus asked him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour--when darkness reigns."

Then seizing him, they led him away [and Jesus' followers fled]...Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of a courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But [Peter] denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said. A little later someone else saw him

and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Sermon

When I had picked the title of today's service, I had no idea that our soon-to-be former Governor would give me such a compelling example of betrayal for a sermon illustration. I doubt many of us need any help connecting with the feeling of being betrayed this morning. The promised reformer of Albany politics has fallen off his white horse and betrayed the promise of fidelity to his wife by soliciting the services of a prostitute. The former sheriff of Wall Street has betrayed our trust by participating in interstate crime.

While the news came as a shock Monday afternoon, such scandal is hardly unusual – save that he got caught. Men of his position and stature fall from grace on a regular basis as their private passions trip them up. Even the betrayal of public trust is almost expected here in Albany. Veterans of Albany politics regularly witness the newly elected, high minded public official being sucked down into the mud as the pork is being doled out to hungry legislators eager to take it back to their districts. Albany is also well known to be the hunting grounds for lascivious legislators and their aides, away from home and looking for a good time; and woe to those naive idealists, who come to Albany expecting to see good government or even hoping to reform it and quickly become jaded, their trust betrayed, watching lobbyists buy and sell our elected officials.

What has happened with Spitzer this week may help us gain a little sympathy for Judas. The section from Mark suggests Judas was outraged as he saw the woman anointing Jesus with perfume that might have been valued at 20-30 thousand dollars, a year's wage today for many. Instead of rebuking her, Jesus praised her and made that statement our legislators could easily say today as they divert needed funds from human services, "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want." The level of insensitivity in that statement continues to shock us even two thousand years later. The author of Mark suggests Judas betrays his teacher, not for the money but in anger that Judas himself felt betrayed. In the lyrics of Jesus Christ Superstar:

I came because I had to / Because I'm the one who saw
 Jesus can't control it / Like he did before
 And furthermore I know / That Jesus thinks so too
 Jesus wouldn't mind / That I was here with you
 I have no thought at all / Of my own reward
 I really didn't come here / Of my own accord
 Just don't say I'm / Damned for all time!

There are few stronger emotions than those of being betrayed by another. The betrayed experience powerful feelings of violation. They feel damaged, their trust abused. Betrayal acts as an assault on the integrity of the individual, affecting their capacity to trust. Those who are betrayed often find their confidence in their judgment undermined. They commonly experience an increase of distrust and skepticism, a contraction in their view of the world's possibilities for them. At a deep level, betrayal can damage the human spirit.

We remember with bitterness the great betrayals of history. Benedict Arnold's treason defines betrayal for many Americans. Shakespeare's Macbeth is a study in betrayal as he disposes of good King Duncan. Dante considered Brutus to be the epitome of betrayal. In his Inferno section of the Divine Comedy, he portrayed Brutus, Longinus, the prime mover behind the betrayal of Caesar, and Judas being chewed, but never consumed, by Satan, at the very lowest level of Hell.

The betrayal we all know and hate is the betrayal that happens in love. Few if any of us have not had our hearts broken by a lover. Song, poetry and literature is full of the agony of betrayed love. We open our hearts in faith and trust to another only to have them crushed and discarded with all the care of the handling of a used tissue as our beloved seeks another's affections. Listen to this tavern song that captures the spirit of betrayed love:

There is a tavern in the town, in the town,
And there my true love sits him down, sits him down,
And drinks his wine 'mid laughter free,
And never, never thinks of me.

Such betrayal leaves us scared to trust, scared to leave ourselves vulnerable. It leaves us forever feeling like we need to be looking over our emotional shoulder. However, at the same time that we are scared to leave ourselves vulnerable, we are also desperately hurt and lonely.

People like "Joan," who helped put her husband through medical school. Six months after setting up his own practice, he divorced her in favor of his cute young nurse. It's no surprise that she feels betrayed and angry and now she is sure she can never let herself love again.

Or what about "John," aged 55, who worked for the same company 20 years and then got fired. They used a nice term, "downsizing," but the pain is the same, and the worst thing is that the promotion he thinks he earned was given to a 40-year-old coworker. Now he sits at home all day, living on unemployment pay—and tranquilizers.

http://www.erchog.org/Sermons/february_5_2006.htm

I'm sure we can all add our own example to these two. It is hard to live a full life without encountering betrayal.

Jesus wasn't just betrayed by Judas, I remind you, but also by Peter who puts his own safety ahead of his loyalty and commitment to Jesus. Both Judas and Peter weep bitterly for their betrayal. But one goes to the very lowest level of Hell and eternal suffering and the other becomes the rock of the church. And what about the ten other disciples who disappear and also deny Jesus? Is this the kind of moral integrity and authenticity on which to build a church?

Judas' damnation has never seemed quite fair to me. Some Biblical interpreters, along with the newly discovered Gospel of Judas, have cast Judas as following Jesus' wish to be captured and killed so the prophecy can be fulfilled and the world redeemed. If indeed, the crucifixion was necessary anyway to pay the price for our salvation, then Judas should be a saint, taking on universal hate to set up the possibility for universal reward. Jorge Luis Borges proposes: if Jesus only suffered while dying on the cross and then ascended into Heaven, while Judas must suffer for eternity in Hell, then, does Judas not suffer *much more* for the sins of humanity than Jesus?

The lesson for us on betrayal this morning, does not come from figuring out how to assess blame or punishment but rather from interpreting the three actions Jesus takes in response to being betrayed. Betrayal is an unavoidable part of the human condition therefore we need to learn to move through it and beyond it, since we'll never eliminate it. The passion folktale found in the Gospels teaches one excellent way.

First, during the Last Passover Feast, Jesus confronts those who will betray him. Jesus doesn't flinch from what he knows is about to happen and gives both Judas and Peter a chance to take responsibility. Judas, still swimming in his own self-righteousness, believing he is doing the right thing, refuses to confess his betrayal. Peter doesn't recognize his own vulnerability to fear and vows to be loyal to the death. Still, Jesus doesn't cast them out as traitors. On the contrary, he breaks bread with them and drinks wine with them. In doing so, he proclaims there is even room at the holy table for the most treacherous and unworthy.

The second thing Jesus does is interrupt the urge for retaliation and revenge as Judas' betrays him with a kiss. I particularly like the version in Luke because he heals the ear of the slave of the high priest chopped off by one of his followers. The most powerful, overwhelming urge in response to betrayal is resorting to violence. Jesus refuses to meet betrayal with violence and surrenders himself voluntarily. He accepts the necessity of the moment and meets it with courage and conviction, while still verbally protesting his secret arrest.

The final thing Jesus does is forgive. Alone, bereft of all his followers, beaten, stripped of his clothes, humiliated in execution, he labors for his final breaths. In those final breaths, with his last ounce of strength, he asks for forgiveness for those who have betrayed and persecuted him, "Abba, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," Jesus whispers.

If we dare to trust and open ourselves to love, we will risk betrayal. The closer we get to another, the lower we drop our defenses, the greater the potential for danger. Yet, a life without love would be hollow and greatly impoverished. The meaning, value and fulfillment of trusting and loving relationships that open the way to intimacy and to community far exceed the risk of betrayal.

Jesus' love is fearless and unconditional because he knows the truth of our unconditional potential for inherent worth and dignity. Jesus penetrates the fear, anger and artificial limits we use to defend ourselves, to connect with the universality of our humanity. The root of Jesus' forgiveness is grounded in the Spirit of Life and Love that knows no betrayal or death.

May we, who experience betrayal, learn to penetrate the fear, anger, and hurt, understand the illusions from which it arises, and restore our faith in our capacity to trust and love again.

May we, who betray, learn to penetrate the fear, anger, and hurt, understand the illusions from which it arises, and restore our faith in our capacity to trust and love again.

And may we all practice forgiveness and reconciliation again, and again, and again.

Benediction

We are potentially all the characters in this Passion folktale. Many, if not all of us, have been betrayed and a good portion of us have also been the betrayer.

Barbara Kingsolver suggests the way out of betrayal for us: Every betrayal contains a perfect moment, she writes, a coin stamped heads or tails with salvation on the other side.

Strive as we might, we are not perfect and will fail to be faithful to each other and our highest ideals, sometimes in spectacular ways as Governor Spitzer has just demonstrated. There is little to be gained in retaliation or revenge for that further rips apart the threads that weave us together. And there is no way to move past betrayal until forgiveness appears in one heart or the other.

Today, may we commit ourselves to move through and beyond the experience of betrayal seeking that perfect moment with salvation on the other side.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.

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