

May 9, 2004

"SHINE!"

John 13-30-35

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

No one name their child Judas anymore – at least, I've never met a Judas! Once, however, Judas was a proud and common name. One of Jesus' brothers was named Judas. Two of Jesus' disciples were named Judas. Likely, they were named after a famous Jewish freedom fighter and national hero, Judas Maccabeus.

Now the name Judas instantly conjures up thoughts of treachery, deceit and betrayal. The problem, of course, is Jesus' disciple Judas, who was nicknamed Iscariot. He was a member of the Jesus' inner circle. Judas managed the money for the wandering band of disciples. And, the gospel writers tell us, Judas was driven by greed. He was a thief and stole from the common purse.

Sadly, it's likely that Judas was also driven even more by ambition. His nickname, Iscariot, may mean he was a zealot, a member of a group of revolutionaries who sometimes assassinated Roman officials. Two other disciples were zealots. They were attracted to Jesus because he seemed to be the one great figure who would drive the hated Romans from Israel.

But Jesus didn't turn out like Judas hoped. Jesus didn't gather a revolutionary army. He seemed uninterested in the seething political cauldron that was Jewish politics. His kingdom turned out to be quite different.

Disappointed, Judas made a deal with the authorities to deliver Jesus to them. You know the story, Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss that led Jesus to his death.

Judas probably didn't know his deal with the authorities was really a deal with the Devil. We seldom do. But he was convinced his plan was right. Judas was utterly convinced his cause was just. He just knew his will was God's will. His ambition made him blind to God's cause. And he lived out the rest of his short life experiencing the unintended consequences of his blind ambition. Ambition is a very greedy goddess. It devours the soul and, often, destroys lives.

But Jesus knew. At the last supper, as John tells the story, Jesus turned to Judas and said, "Do what you have to do quickly." And, John adds, "Judas went out into the night." He left and walked into the darkness of his own ambition.

We join him there. We've all made our bargains with life. We've done we had to do in order to serve our ambition, to get where we want to go. Perhaps, we've betrayed ourselves, our friends, even our faith to serve our own ambition. And some of us are living with the unintended but very real consequences. Ambition has touched our relationships, hurt our families, damaged our children. Ambition is a greedy goddess, indeed.

When Judas went out into the night, John continues, Jesus told the rest of the disciples, "Now...." Now, Jesus said, everything is ready. The last piece is in place. Everything so far leads me to this moment. This is the end of the journey.

"Now, I'm about to be glorified and that will, in turn glorify God." Now, I don't know about you, but I wish John made Jesus as plain spoken, direct and understandable as, say Mark. In Mark, Jesus goes straight to the point, "O.K. boys, I'm going to suffer and die. I will rise again."

All that being glorified stuff means the same thing it's just that John puts it in theological language straight from the rest of the Bible. The problem is that we don't have a good handle on the word glory and how to apply that to Jesus.

At the church retreat last week, we tackled this word, "glory." I asked the group what they thought of when they heard that word. The first response was "bright." The second: "brightness" or "shining." The last suggestion was "awesome."

Those are good, biblical, responses. Often in Scripture God is described as glorious, having a shining brightness that stuns people. Or, to put it another way, glory is like putting a 10,000 watt backlight behind a figure. It makes them shine, to seem beyond the ordinary, to suggest something supernatural. At the least, the backlit, shining figure seems extraordinary compared to the ordinary all around.

When the Bible describes visions of God, it's in picture language. The writers strain to find words to describe what they're seeing. Language simply isn't big enough to contain God. In the end, the Bible says this is the "glory" of God. It's God's resplendence, splendorousness, majesty. God is just plain AWESOME!

God's glory is the "wow" factor in the Bible. God makes people say, "Wow!"

Or, to put the Gospel Lesson in oversimplified terms, Jesus said, "O.K. boys and girls, now I'm going to shine. My shining will make God shine. Now, you want to know how great God is? Watch this!"

Judas walked out into the darkness of his own creation. Jesus would to turn on a divine light and show you the glory of God. Notice Jesus didn't try to define the word glory – like I just did. He doesn't refer us to a dictionary. He's going to show us. "Watch this," he says.

Then, just when Jesus has our attention, maddeningly, he changes the subject.

"Oh, by the way," Jesus interrupted himself, "I'm going away and you can't come with me. Now while I'm gone, there's just one thing I want you to do. Are you listening? It's just a single command. One thing and one thing only. Ready?"

This one thing is a "new command." It's not really all that new. It's just, "Love one another." God's been telling us to love one another since the creation. That's an old (and seldom obeyed) command.

What's new is the model for loving one another. Jesus didn't tell the disciples to read a book on love or look it up in the dictionary either. He showed them what this love command looks like. "Love one another, AS I HAVE LOVED YOU." I've already shown you what love looks like and I'm about to show you again. Watch me!

Then Jesus turns back to his subject. When he finished talking, Jesus got up from the table and walked toward the cross. Can you see it? The glory of Jesus is the cross. The glory of Jesus' cross is the glory of God. And this whole glory thing is embedded in the love of Jesus which reflects the love of God.

Remember that famous verse at the beginning of John, "For God so loved the world, he gave his son..." Because of love God gave his Son to the world. Because of love, Jesus, the Son, gave his life for the world.

As I have loved you. It's the same way God loves. God gives, God sacrifices. Jesus gives himself away. He suffers for the sake of others. He sacrifices everything to accomplish God's cause.

As I have loved you – love one another. Loving one another is to sacrifice ourselves, to give our lives to each other. It means giving ourselves in sacrificial service to God's cause in the world God loves. Can you see it?

To love is to be caught up in a new kind of ambition. It's a new way to shine. To love is to have our lives driven by love for the world like God's love for us revealed in Jesus Christ. It's to love people with the passion God loves us. It's to throw our lives into God's cause for the sheer love of the world.

As I have loved you. Serve one another, sacrifice your lives and resources for something grand, something far beyond our puny human ambitions. To love means to pursue Jesus' dream for the world not our own.

Jesus is gone, but he left something behind. He left his love – not just any love, his love.

I recall back in the '60s political debates some conservatives were saying about civil rights legislation, "You can't legislate morality. You can't make people love other people."

I suppose there is an inner logic to that statement – if love is an emotion, if love is an attraction to others accompanied by affection. But, but if love is a moral decision and a way of life that flows from a moral decision, love can be commanded. And that kind of love is commanded by Jesus. Jesus' love is a moral decision that places us in the service of a new ambition, God's cause on earth.

Jesus also left his people, the community of faith we call the church. "By this [love] they will know you are my disciples," Jesus added. Jesus' love takes on flesh in the people who bear his name. Our life together is a reflection of our love – or lack thereof.

I recall a prophetic figure back in the '70s telling us that if Jesus is correct about loving one another, that our love demonstrates our discipleship, then the opposite is also true. Impolitely, he pointed his finger at us and said, "If the watching world can't see Jesus' kind of love in the church, then the world has a right to conclude we are not Jesus' disciples."

Hard words, but true. And the good news I bring you today is that it can be done, we can love one another as Jesus loves us. After all, the one we follow has another name. His name is Resurrection. He rose to new life and sends his spirit to his followers. We can be new, live new, love new.

IF, if we throw ourselves into his life, his cause, his sacrificial love. We can be new people with new love if we trust him. If we entrust our everlasting lives to his care – and to his service. Now that is a daring and life altering ambition.

Love is not fleeting some emotion that comes and goes with the weather. Love is moral commitment to others. Sometimes that's not easy nor does it always feel good. But I'll tell you this: at the end of the day, nothing satisfies quite like sacrificial service on behalf of others. It's the way God made us!