

John 18:1-11 – Return from Betrayal

Imagine for a minute that someone you trust has betrayed you. The details of the betrayal aren't all that important. Perhaps you told this person something in confidence, and they shared it with someone else. Maybe this person pretended to be a supporter, and it turned out that they were manipulating you for their own personal gain.

I suspect many of you are thinking about an event that happened to you. You haven't conjured up some imaginary betrayal; no, I'm guessing that the prompt brought to mind an actual betrayal. Something that hurt you deeply at the time and still stings a bit.

Our theme for today revolves around betrayal. You may recall that we are working through a sermon series this Lent based on God's call to return to Him. We're looking at different events that occurred during Jesus' passion and thinking about the sins committed. I hope that we will see the ways that our sins pull us away from God and that we will hear His call to return to Him because He offers reconciliation and forgiveness.

In our Gospel reading the betrayal, of course, is that of Judas Iscariot. He makes a deal with the chief priests and scribes to turn Jesus over to them, knowing full well that they intend to have Him killed. Judas' actions are hard to comprehend; they are dark and painful and self-serving. We have no problem recognizing the sin in what he did, but it may be harder for us to see it when we betray Jesus through our own actions. We'll get back to that in a moment, but I want to set the stage by first looking at another betrayal, an older betrayal; that of King David by his son, Absalom, and his trusted advisor, Ahithophel.

This is a story of betrayal, but it is also a story of how one sin can cause many others, and how the consequences of sin rippled out to impact many more people than we might expect. It starts with a sordid affair between David and Bathsheba. You know that story. He sees her bathing on the rooftop, initiates an inappropriate affair, she becomes pregnant, he tries to find a way to cover up the sinful liaison, but his plan goes awry, so he ups the ante and basically makes arrangements to ensure that her husband Uriah will be killed in battle. In the meantime, David is called out for his sin, he repents, the baby dies, and a huge rift is created within David's own family.

One of the major impacts of David and Bathsheba's sin is that rift in the family. Absalom, one of David's sons, rebels and undertakes a campaign to unseat his father and take over the throne. One of the people that Absalom enlists in his plot is Ahithophel, a trusted advisor to David, who also happened to be ... wait for it ... Bathsheba's grandfather. What could possibly go wrong?!

As the story unfolds, Ahithophel outlines a plot to Absalom by which he would raise up an army of 12,000 men to hunt down and kill David. And Absalom liked the plan. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work out that way, which is a little ironic because Ahithophel's plan probably would have been successful. But David had planted a spy, Hushai, who outlined a different plan involving a lot more men, and Absalom chose to go with that. Hushai had tipped David off to exactly what was coming, so it didn't work out very well: Absalom died. Ahithophel died. And David retained the throne.

But the betrayal haunted David. In fact, it even came out in one of his Psalms. Specifically, Psalm 41, where David says, **"Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me."** David laments the fact that a trusted advisor, almost certainly Ahithophel, has betrayed him ... has turned against him and taken steps to try and kill him in order to place someone else on the throne. Betrayal is hurtful.

We understand the pain that betrayal causes because we have all been subjected to it at some point. It's why I asked you at the beginning of the sermon to imagine being betrayed by someone you trusted deeply.

But we don't always consider the way our actions amount to a betrayal of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Ahithophel betrayed David in order to put someone else on the throne, and you've done exactly the same thing.

You've betrayed Jesus in order to put yourself on the throne. You've denied His lordship before others. You've ignored God's commandments and sought to do things your own way. You've treated others thoughtlessly and elevated yourself over them, directly contradicting the Biblical encouragement to **"count others more significant than yourselves."**

And the result of our betrayal? The Gospel message is blunted. The Good News is blocked. People don't hear or see of the amazing love of Christ because we have pushed Jesus into the background or denied His importance in our own lives.

God urges us to be bold in our proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus Himself said that we were to **"go therefore and make disciples of all nations,"** and yet our actions are exactly the opposite. A betrayal that avoids discipling by avoiding the sharing of the good news. A betrayal that seeks to make Jesus secondary to our own ambitions, and that desires to sinfully elevate ourselves.

This is not easy to hear, I know. It's a little like the reading from Acts that we heard just a moment ago, where Peter spoke in Solomon's Portico and called the Israelites to repentance. **"You denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead."** But Peter's words end with an encouragement that is very familiar to us: **"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out."**

It echoes the invitation that we heard on Ash Wednesday from the prophet Joel: **"Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."**

Astonishingly, Jesus knew all of this in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew about Judas' betrayal, sure, but He also knew about yours. He knew that you would fail. He knew that you would betray Him in fifty little ways without even intending to. And He knew that He had the solution. **"Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?"**

God says, "Return to Me! I want you to be true to Me, but even when you fail at that, I have already stepped in to provide blessings!" He offers forgiveness. He offers peace. And He offers the strength to turn back and receive His blessings.

When we return to God, we receive all that He has promised. We are washed in the blood of the lamb and our sins are taken away from us. We are strengthened in Holy Communion and in the word of God which offers us comfort, but also gives us words to speak and stories to tell others that they also may turn back to God. In Him, all is made right. All is made clean. All is reconciled.

May you be encouraged to share the Gospel, to turn from betrayal and return to God, and may you be blessed and strengthened in all that you do, that it may bring glory to Him.