

“Night Moves”

A Homily for Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2006
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Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. John 13:1-2

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Though debated by scholars, the Last Supper was commonly assumed in Christian tradition generally to refer to the Passover meal observed by Jesus and his disciples, the night before he died. In Jewish tradition, the holy days begin at Sundown on the eve of the festival. As night descends into darkness and shadow, things happen. I call them “night moves.”

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

On this night, Jesus is moved to “love us to the end.” It becomes for us our commemoration of his institution of the bread & wine, the body and blood of the sacrificial love by which God is willing to bend; extended further by the depths which Jesus, our Lord and master, is willing to stoop to demonstrate a Kingdom whose power and dominion is based not on brute force; but reconciling love, forgiveness, meekness, humility and servanthood. He washes feet.

Where kings and messiahs were to be anointed with costly perfumed oil dripping like a crown upon their foreheads, we wash and even anoint the tired feet of faithful pilgrims who are about to have finished your Lenten trek; anointing your feet, not your heads, so that you may continue in the path that came to be known by early Christian believers simply as “the Way.”

Looking back, early believers struggled to differentiate themselves from those who – as early traditions were keen to put it -- did not follow in *the way*; like Judas, who was castigated and made out to be the scapegoat, the fall guy, the bad guy, the betrayer. As John’s gospel tells it,

The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

Okay, by now everyone’s heard of the Gospel of Judas. National Geographic spent the last five years painstakingly putting together the papyrus fragments rediscovered three decades ago in a safe deposit box on Long Island. They’ve translated the Coptic with the best scholarship available. It is believed to be an authentic third century copy of an original manuscript, whose existence is referred to in about 180 CE, by Iraneus, an early church father.

The author is unknown, as is the exact date of the Judas gospel; but that was common with such manuscripts, if they were considered by the author to be of such timeless importance as not to be concerned with such trivial matters as who wrote it, and when. But scholars peg it somewhere in the middle of the second century; that is, a good 100+ years (or a couple generations) after Jesus’ crucifixion.

Most notable in the manuscript is a portion that reads, "The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week, three days before he celebrated Passover." Referring first to the other disciples, the text goes on to tell Judas "you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." This is a type of literature known as Gnosticism,

suggesting Jesus was asking Judas to help him shed his physical body, in order to liberate true spiritual self or divine being within Jesus.

In this sense, it may only be a few steps removed from some of the passages we read in the Gospel of John, written before the apocryphal gospel of Judas, but itself decades after the earthly Jesus' life; where Jesus describes himself in very non-human terms, like vine and the branches, the bread of life and lamb of God.

Nonetheless, the Gospel of Judas is seen as a bombshell, dropped into the fray of Holy Week. What are modern, believing Christians to make of this recasting of Judas from the treacherous traitor who sells classified information and "outs" the identity of his rabble ringleader for thirty pieces of silver; now recast as Jesus' closest, most trusted disciple; more beloved than Peter, James and John. Was Judas really the one worthy enough to be entrusted with faithfully fulfilling Jesus' divine destiny? Are we now to believe he wasn't a mere pawn of power elite, of Herod and Pilate, the Sanhedrin, Scribes & Pharisees; but instead God's most obedient servant?

Here's what I think: As scholars are nearly giddy with delight over the prospects of debating the true identity of Judas' character for decades to come, while certain believers desperately scurry to cling to only authorized versions of the canonical gospels, we all know what can happen when night comes and darkness falls; before we see things anew with the light of day. I call them "night moves."

It's night, and Jesus will push himself back from the supper table. He'll wrap the servant's towel 'round his waist and drop to his knees in humble subjugation. *Night moves.*

He'll leave the safety of home and hearth, to go pray in the dark in the garden. He'll pray so hard, his prayers will be described as sweat dripping from his fevered brow like drops of blood. *Night moves.*

The stumbling and bumbling disciples will follow, half drunk with sleep and wine, apparently oblivious to Judas having slipped away. *Night moves.*

The betrayer will appear with a mob, carrying clubs and cudgels and flickering torches in the dark, causing swirling shadows to leap and dance; while the sleepy followers of Jesus rub their bleary eyes, squinting into the fleeting night light. *Night moves.*

Judas will make his move. He'll sidle up alongside Jesus, and mark the man with a kiss. *Night moves.*

The mob will seize the man to haul him away. Or, is it already only the shadow of the man? Had Judas already helped his master "to depart from this world and go to the Father," as even John's gospel puts it? It's hard to tell in the dark. *Night moves.*

The frightened, faithless disciples will flee into the night, and abandon him. Except Peter. Peter will follow, at a distance in the shadows, into the courtyard of the High Priest; only to have his cloaked identity almost convict him in the light from the fire where he warms himself. *Night moves.*

So, let's see. Even according to the prevailing tradition of the Church, Judas betrays him with a cruel kiss, while the rest of the disciples abandon him; except for Peter who hangs around long enough to deny him. Three times. Before the cock crows in the pre-dawn hours.

In the end, they all kiss him off, each in their own way. Such is the night. Such are the night moves. That's how the story of Maundy Thursday ends. And if that is the end of it, it's a sorry tale.

It's a tale of love, and a lesson in love. A lesson how to love, as he loved us.

But it's also a tale of love, and love lost; lost to a Friday, when the sky will turn dark as night from noon till three in the afternoon. And then a hasty burial because the day was almost spent again; and it is the day of preparation before the Sabbath and darkness will descend upon a rock-hewn tomb.

Now it's our own *night moves*: The altar is stripped bare. The cross is draped in darkness. The flicker of the tabernacle light is snuffed out. The sanctuary is left barren and abandoned. For good or ill, we've done all we can do. Nothing more to do now, but wait.

Then stillness.

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