



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A SEARCHING QUESTION”

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 26:47-56

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, April 5, 2009.

It is a searching, penetrating question really and it only appears in the gospel of Matthew. It is the question that Jesus directs to Judas Iscariot, the most infamous of all the disciples, as Judas betrays him with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. If you missed it in the reading of the scripture lesson a few moments ago it is quite understandable because in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible it appears as a command more than a question: “Friend, do what you are here to do.” The earlier Revised Standard Version translates it this way: “Friend, why are you here?” The New International Version says, “Friend, do what you came for.” Tom Wright, in his translation and commentary on the gospel of Matthew renders the expression this way, “My Friend, what are you doing here?”

Why the confusion? The problem is the original Greek here is rather cryptic and confusing and makes possible various renderings. To be quite candid, the rendering I really prefer is in the King James Version of the Bible where the statement is put in question form and also in language that is quite archaic and remote: “Friend, wherefore art thou come?” Awkward yes, but this is one of those many haunting turns of a phrase found in the King James Version of the Bible which becomes both majestic and memorable. In the Greek we have only a sentence fragment so translators have to do their best to discern what was intended. Was it a question or was it a command?

More contemporary translators prefer to render the words in the imperative because they argue that Jesus knew full well why Judas was there. Earlier in the evening, according to John, as they had sat about the table in the upper room Jesus had told Judas to go ahead and be about his business. Nevertheless, I prefer the question rather than the command because I am convinced that Jesus was asking the question for his own benefit but for the benefit of Judas. No, Jesus did not need an answer to that question but most assuredly Judas did. I believe that Jesus wanted this disciple whom he loved and whom he addressed as friend to come up with an answer for himself, to examine honestly the motive and the purpose behind this gesture of affection, this kiss, which became an act of betrayal.

You see, in all probability Judas was not fully certain why he was there. Personally I have a difficult time believing that Judas turned his over to the authorities for a mere 30 pieces of silver. Oh, I know, greed can bring about radical changes in a person’s character and can skew their motives and their ethics. But remember that Judas was the treasurer of the band of disciples, and no doubt, he had many opportunities to pilfer funds and to feed his greed if that is what he intended. John 12:6 even suggests that Judas did this from time to time and views Judas as a thief. But frankly, I wonder if that was not more rumor and suspicion after the fact than anything else because there is no indication that Judas was ever relieved of the treasury. If the disciples had seriously thought before his death that he was taking money from the till, I’m sure he would have been relieved of the responsibility.

Why then was Judas betraying his master, if not for the money? Throughout the generations people have speculated that Judas was simply misguided and overly zealous and was, in truth, trying to force the hand of Jesus, trying to make him demonstrate his messianic power to redeem Israel in a face to face confrontation with the religious and political powers in Jerusalem. Maybe Judas was tired of hearing people claim that Jesus was just a charlatan and so he took matters into his own hands in an effort to orchestrate a situation in which Jesus would be forced to demonstrate his power and his authority.

Well, whatever Judas' plan and purpose, it must have backfired. He may have realized too late that Jesus was not the militant warrior Messiah that he and most of Israel expected. All of this is speculation to be sure but whatever Judas' reason for betraying his Lord, it proved to be a fatal mistake. Jesus did not resist but submitted to arrest and imprisonment and the next morning Judas repents, throws the money back at the Chief Priest in the Temple, and goes out and hangs himself. Just perhaps, if he had more carefully examined his motives earlier and really struggled with a question, "Why am I here after all?", then he would not be remembered to this day as the villainous and despised betrayer of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Friend, wherefore art thou come?" That is a rather provocative question, or at least it can be. Why do I raise it with you on this Palm Sunday as we come once again to the table of our Lord? Well, I do so precisely because it is Palm Sunday because we are about to focus on the betrayal, the arrest and the crucifixion of Jesus and because this day we gather at table with our Lord also. So I would invite and challenge each of us to examine our own motives for being here in worship this day and for gathering about this table. Why are we here, in other words?

Let me tell you an interesting place where the question, "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" appears. Off the coast of Scotland is a small island in the Hebrides called Iona. Some of us have been there and more of us may be going next year if the choir decides to do a tour of Scotland. At any rate, Iona is place sacred in the hearts and minds of all Scots and of most Christians in that part of the world. It remains one of the most hallowed spots in Scotland because it was here that St. Columba brought Christianity to Scotland fifteen centuries ago. One of the buildings restored on the island is a tiny cathedral that dates from the 13th century. On the Lord's Day, the Lord's Supper at the Iona community is celebrated according to the tradition of the Church of Scotland. It is a stern and simple ritual which follows the classical reformed tradition of Presbyterianism. The chalices, however that are used for this Eucharist are of modern glass beautifully crafted and etched, and around the top of each is an inscription which reads: "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" Five simple, soul searching, haunting words. Let me just suggest to you that it is a question that each of us ought to be asking ourselves as we come together for this sacrament. Why are you here? What is your intention in receiving the Eucharist? And the truth, I suspect, is that there are many reasons why we are here.

Some of us may be coming to this table to day by accident. Either we did not know or else we forgot that this was communion Sunday and we may have been caught of guard as we entered the sanctuary and saw the table already prepared. Consequently, we really haven't given much thought to why we are here today or why we are coming to the table. Some may have seen on the church calendar that today was communion Sunday but the probability is you did not recall it until you arrived. After all there have been many things on your mind in recent days.

Of course, if you are visiting with us today there was no way you could have known that this was communion Sunday.

“Friend, wherefore art thou come?” Now if some would answer the question by admitting they are here by accident, others would answer that they are here out of habit, but that could be equally disturbing. “Wait a minute, preacher,” you may be thinking, “I was under the impression that it is an admirable thing for a person to develop a habit of attending worship and participating in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.” Well, that is true if by habit you mean that it is simple something that you do regularly and by intention. But that is more of a discipline than a habit. Webster suggests that the word habit implies something done unconsciously or without premeditation. A habit is some action that is so routine, so familiar, so mechanical that you do it with out thinking. But we should never participate in worship or share in a sacrament without thinking, without renewing our intentions and our vows to God and to others. We do not share in the Eucharist or baptize our children just because it is a customary routine expected of us, or at least I hope we do not. At a baptism parents and participants are asked some rather important questions that should never be taken lightly or answered mechanically. Likewise, I hope that none of us comes to this table simply out of routine and habit, but rather conscious of our own personal need and serious about our desire to commune with our Lord, to receive the benefits of that communion and to be equipped by God’s grace to live better as the disciples of Christ.

In Scotland many churches still have a custom that in some ways prevents a member of the kirk from coming to communion other than by intention. After we arrived in Scotland in 1974 as I was beginning my studies at New College, we attended worship at the Church of Scotland down the road from where we lived. Upon leaving that Sunday the minister asked if we planned to be in attendance for the Lord’s Supper the next Sunday. I told him that we did and he said, “Ah, well I will be by for a visit on Thursday.” We discovered that Thursday that at least one of the purposes for his visit was to issue us a communion card which we were told to present to the usher at the door. And what we were discovering was that while one was not required to have a card in order to receive the sacrament, they were highly advisable nonetheless. Now there can be arguments both for and against such a practice but one of the things that it does is to prevent people from stumbling in upon the sacrament. This practice is a carryover from former days when communicants in Scotland and in this congregation were examined by the minister or the Elders and issued communion tokens before receiving the sacrament. In some Reformed churches around the world such as in Northern Ireland, this remains the custom.

“Friend, wherefore art thou come?” Why are you here today as we enter Holy Week? Why are we gathered about this table? I am sure many of us are here neither by accident nor out of habit but by a conscious decision. Maybe the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a high and holy moment in our spiritual lives, a brief stop for renewal and purification along our life’s pilgrimage. Perhaps we made a special effort to be in attendance today precisely because the sacrament is being observed. Maybe we envision ourselves being with the disciples in the upper room on the night of his betrayal. Maybe in this sacrament we are reminded in a visible and tangible way of the Lord’s sacrifice for us and of his inclusion of us within the beloved community. Maybe we are here because we are making resolutions afresh to live by his spirit and to rely upon his strength as we endeavor to serve him.

There still may be others here intentionally and yet for another reason. Since we last communed something has jarred us were we did not expect to be jarred. Something has happened in our lives that has made us realized that we have been slacked and slovenly in our religious fervor or in our Christian conviction. Maybe we realize that we have somehow veered off the path that the Lord has laid out for us and we need as never before to confess our sin, to receive forgiveness, to renew our baptismal vows, and to get back on track with the Lord and his ways. Or maybe something has occurred that has made us realize afresh in a profound way our need for God --- a serious illness diagnosis, a relationship destroyed or strained, a new burdened encountered.

“Friend, wherefore art thou come?” Why are you here? If you were not asking that question as you entered this sanctuary then I encourage you to ask it of yourself just now. It is always appropriate to engage in a little self examination the question our Lord asked is one that that no one can answer for anyone else. I would not presume to answer it for any of you or to set myself up as a judge of your intentions or motivations. Truth be known, all of us are here with mixed motives at best. We are like Judas in that respect. We are a mixture of motives and purposes. We are both sinner and saint, a friend of Jesus as well as his betrayer. We may think to ourselves, “Oh I could never betray my Lord with a kiss,” but we have our own means of treachery which are equally perverse.

Benedict Arnold, yet another traitor his name, like that of Judas, is a byword for treason, asked a man supposedly: “What will be my fate if I am taken prisoner?” The man questioned is said to have answered, “Why, Sir, they will cut off that shortened leg of yours wounded at Québec and Saratoga, and bury it with all the honors of war; and then they will hang the rest of you on a gibbet.” Now if only our treacheries could be confined to one part of our body then perhaps surgery might rid us of our offenses but the truth the Reformers recognized in the doctrine of Total Depravity is that there is no aspect of our being, physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual that is not somehow tainted by sin and a reason for offense.

And so in conclusion knowing that our motives and purposes are mixed at best let me say that whatever the reasons for our coming here today and for gathering about this table, we are were we ought to be. This is a table and a sacrament meant for sinners. If we wait to receive this sacrament until we deserve it, we will never receive it. Let no one confuse being prepared with being worthy. None of us deserves a spot at this table and yet by our Lord’s gracious invitation we are afforded this opportunity. So however you answer the question, “Friend, wherefore art thou come?” just know that the Savior is pleased to have you here. Amen.