

Welcome

I want to begin today with a story about how a dinner party saved a white supremacist.

In 2008, a group of the most prominent and influential white supremacists in the US met at a secret conference to plan how to "take back America". One of the keynote addresses was given by 19-year old Derek Black, who hosted his own radio show and had just launched a white supremacy website for children. Derek's father started the oldest and most popular white supremacist website and his mother was once married to David Duke - one of the most infamous racists in America. In fact, David Duke is Derek Black's godfather. Needless to say, Derek was a pretty big deal at this conference. He was introduced as the leading light of the movement.

My suspicion is that just hearing a little bit of Derek's story is enough to make your skin crawl. Since the sort of racism Derek and his movement advocate includes a version of Christianity that explicitly embraces white supremacy, I imagine that only further offends most of us gathered here for worship.

It's safe to say that Derek is not a person you would want to invite over for a dinner party.

Which is unfortunate because a dinner party is what saved Derek Black's life. Derek Black isn't a white supremacist anymore. And the story of how he found his way out of a life of hate is a story of hope for all of us.

Because if someone like Derek Black, the leading light of the white supremacist movement, can be saved by a dinner party, then surely there is hope for all of us to be rescued from our prejudices, our blind spots, our toxic and false beliefs.

Today isn't about how we can be nice to white supremacists. Today is about how we can recognize the Derek Black in ourselves, and how we find freedom from and victory over those hateful parts of ourselves when we choose to open ourselves to that which scares us. Preferably over a meal.

Message

We're in a series called *Empathy for the Devil*. We're meeting six of the worst villains in the Bible and asking, "Why did they do what they did?" We're not looking to apologize or make excuses for them. We simply want to practice some empathy - put ourselves in their shoes. Because ultimately, we'll discover we're more like them than we thought, and reflecting on their sin will illuminate the seeds of those same sins in our own lives.

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, we're going to meet one the ultimate betrayer - Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus. Turn with me to Mark 14. Judas was one of Jesus' inner circle of 12 disciples. He spent more time with Jesus than nearly anyone else in human history, witnessed his miracles and heard his teachings.

But in the last week of Jesus' life, Judas agreed to hand Jesus over to the Jewish authorities for 30 pieces of silver. For this, he's become one of history's greatest villains. We assume Judas was a snake, rotten from the beginning. We assume he was so greedy he'd betray even God's son, the Messiah, to make a few bucks. He's the ultimate back-stabber.

Except, after Jesus is sentenced to be executed, Judas does something strange: He returns the money and pleads for Jesus' life. When that doesn't work, he hangs himself.

Those don't seem like the actions of a greedy person. In fact, they seem like the actions of someone who realized made a terrible mistake.

What mistake, exactly, did Judas make? In short, Judas had the wrong picture of Jesus. He misunderstood who God is so completely that he couldn't see what God was doing even right in front of his face, even when Jesus told him himself.

We know that because of what triggered Judas to betray Jesus. Mark 14 is right in the middle of Holy Week. Jesus has come to Jerusalem and declared himself to be God's chosen Messiah, come to rescue Israel. And the tension in the city has gotten thick. Rome, who rules over Israel, tolerates not even a hint of rebellion. And Jesus has been picking fights with the Jewish authorities - driving merchants from the Temple, publicly humiliating the priests and scribes.

Passover - the big day - is now only two days away and a man named Simon is hosting Jesus and his followers at a dinner party. What happens at the dinner party sends Judas over the edge:

It was now two days before Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The leading priests and the teachers of religious law were still looking for an opportunity to capture Jesus secretly and kill him. "But not during the Passover celebration," they agreed, "or the people may riot."

Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had previously had leprosy. While he was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard. She broke open the jar and poured the perfume over his head.

Some of those at the table were indignant. "Why waste such expensive perfume?" they asked. "It could have been sold for a year's wages and the money given to the poor!" So they scolded her harshly.

But Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. Why criticize her for doing such a good thing to me? You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them whenever you want to. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could and has anointed my body for burial ahead of time. I tell you the truth, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman's deed will be remembered and discussed."

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, went to the leading priests to arrange to betray Jesus to them. -- Mark 14:1-10

A woman pours perfume on Jesus and Judas is so upset that he arranges to betray Jesus.

What is happening here?

Mark tells us the perfume is nard, which is a burial perfume. Ancient peoples used strong perfumes to mask the smell of death in a corpse. These strong smells were inevitably associated in the minds of ancient peoples with funerals and the grave.

Smells are strongly linked to our memories. A particular perfume brings to mind lost love. Certain foods remind us of holidays with families. And some scents remind us of our mortality. The smell of formaldehyde. The pungent odor of eucalyptus so often used in hospitals and hospice. One whiff of those can be enough to transport us back to the deathbed of a loved one, to the funeral of a dear friend or beloved relative.

When the woman poured nard all over Jesus' head, she was treating him like a dead body. In a week full of such tension, this was in poor taste. No wonder the disciples reacted with outrage -- under their anger was fear. Fear that she was right. Fear that this week would end with their master, their rabbi, their Messiah, dead rather than victorious.

And what did Jesus do? He *welcomed* it. He praised her actions.

To the disciples, it seemed as though Jesus was giving up. Rather than fighting for God's kingdom, he was surrendering himself to Rome and the corruption of Jerusalem.

Mark tells us *this* is what triggers Judas. It's after this dinner he agrees to betray Jesus.

The betrayal makes sense if we think Judas is greedy or was planning from the beginning to betray Jesus. But it *doesn't* explain why Judas would not only return the money but kill himself *after Jesus was sentenced to death*.

It's as though Judas wanted Jesus to be arrested, but he didn't expect Jesus to be crucified.

Which, again, doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Having grown up under Roman rule, Judas - like everyone - would have seen dozens of crucifixions. He knew Rome would err on the side of crucifying, not giving possible rebels the benefit of the doubt.

So there's no way Judas would've betrayed Jesus and *not* expected it to end with crucifixion.

Unless Judas really believed Jesus was the Messiah.

What if Judas wasn't the wolf in sheep's clothing we assume him to be? What if he was the truest believer of the whole bunch? What if he was all in on Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the promised champion of God?

And then he sees his Messiah, his long-awaited champion, the embodiment of all those ancient prophecies, *giving up on his Messianic mission*?

What if Judas saw, at that dinner table, a man who decided it was all too much for him?

What if Judas decided he believed in Jesus even more than Jesus believed in himself?

Then Judas might decide to grab the wheel of history. To lay a trap, to force Jesus' hand. What happens when the Messiah's enemies converge on him? How could he *not* be forced to seize his destiny? How could the heavens *not* open up and the armies of God descend and fight for God's champion?

So Judas laid his trap. And Jesus was arrested. But then... nothing happened. Except that Jesus was tried. And found guilty. Still, the heavens remained closed. And Jesus was taken to Pilate, the very embodiment of Rome's power in Jerusalem. But still Jesus did nothing. And he was sentenced to die.

And Judas realized he'd made a mistake. He'd handed an innocent man - his friend and rabbi - over to death. And Judas couldn't live with that mistake.

The true tragedy of Judas' story is that he gave up before he learned the truth. His mistake was not in thinking Jesus was the promised Messiah, but rather in misunderstanding what kind of Messiah Jesus *was*. He killed himself before the story was over.

For Mark, you can only know Jesus fully when you follow him to the Cross.

Let's pause here for a moment and come back to the present day. Because, friends, if the people who followed Jesus around, listened to his teachings, saw his miracles and *heard from his very mouth* that he was going to die could still have a wrong picture of God, how much more likely is it that *we* have a bad picture of God?

Seeing how badly Judas, Peter and the other disciples got Jesus wrong gives me a little empathy for those white supremacists who claim Jesus was white and God is white and God loves white people best.

They're wrong, but they're not the *only* ones who are wrong.

And frankly, if I'm being *really* honest, that insight makes me a little afraid. Because they're *really* wrong. But so was Judas. Judas was so wrong he actually *betrayed God* in the name of his false beliefs.

How can I be sure I'm seeing Jesus clearly? How can I be sure I'm not living my faith in such a way that I'm actually *betraying* the very God I claim to be serving?

This is a difficult question, but Mark gives us the answer:

Calling the crowd to join his disciples, Jesus said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. -- Mark 8:22-34

We see God most clearly only on the Cross.

Judas wasn't willing to go there. Neither were the other disciples. They couldn't imagine a God who would die. They only wanted a God who conquered.

But Mark warns us that is a false picture of God. God is the God who dies. The God of weakness, not strength. The God of losing, not winning.

And if we're going to be that God's disciples, we have to follow him to the Cross.

Because of the day and age and place in which we live, not very many of us will be in a position to follow Jesus to a literal cross.

But we can insist on a faith that is not about strength. One that doesn't fight culture wars and try to win. A faith that attends to the vulnerable, to those who are left out.

This is a difficult faith to cultivate - it runs against the grain of our culture as much as it did for Judas' culture.

But God gave us a particular place, a particular practice to invite us into this vulnerable, cross-shaped faith: the dinner table.

It's no accident that Jesus was constantly attending dinner parties. And it was no accident that those parties were often filled with people that most good, respectable religious folks wouldn't be caught dead with.

People like a former leper. People like Matthew the tax collector. People like sinners and prostitutes. People like Derek Black.

I told you earlier that a dinner party saved Derek Black. Well, it wasn't just a dinner party. It was actually a series of them.

Derek chose to attend a diverse liberal arts college. He was so convinced of his white supremacy that he thought it was invulnerable even to the most liberal place he could think of.

For the first couple of years there, Derek stayed under the radar. He didn't advertise his white power radio show, his white supremacy website or any of his neo-nazi beliefs.

But then Derek studied abroad in Germany for a semester (what better place for a Neo-Nazi?). And while he was gone, another student at his school found his website. He outed Derek as the poster child of white supremacy to the whole school.

And when Derek got back, he found he was a pariah. He lost all his friends. No one quite knew what to do with him.

Except for an Orthodox Jewish student named Matthew. Being the only Jewish kid at the college, Matthew had started hosting Sabbath dinners, inviting other students with any number of different beliefs and identities. It had become sort of a thing.

And Matthew, this Jewish kid who had read the anti-Semitic stuff Derek had posted on his neo-nazi websites, invited Derek to a Sabbath dinner.

It was awkward. *Really* awkward.

So Matthew invited him again the next week. And the week after that. And the week after that.

And something happened. Derek became friends with the students who attended those Sabbath dinners. And those friends - from all kinds of different races and perspectives - were challenging his long-held white supremacist beliefs. He realized he'd grown up in an echo chamber, a place that didn't deal in facts because those facts were a threat to their beliefs.

Over the next couple of years, Derek slowly distanced himself further and further from his white supremacist community until finally he came out, fully denouncing white supremacy and leaving the movement of which he had been a poster child.

When we hear that story, friends, we all want to imagine we're Matthew, the Jewish kid hosting the dinners. But could we for a moment imagine we're Derek instead? Derek who had deeply held beliefs that were just plain wrong, sinfully wrong? Derek who held those beliefs deeply, strongly and eloquently? Derek who was nevertheless wrong, and who was only able finally to see that when he took a risk and sat at a table with people he viewed as inferior?

What does your dinner party look like? Are you, like Derek Black was, living in an echo chamber?

Friends, when we live in an echo chamber, we become all too much like Jesus' disciples - unable to hear God's voice speaking to us because God is drown out by our echo chamber.

We learn to listen for God's challenging, insistent voice by learning to listen to those who are not like us. Psychologist Richard Beck calls these "strange friendships". Strange friendships teach us how our pictures of God are false by surrounding ourselves with those who have different experiences of God than we do.

Choosing to surround ourselves with voices who challenge us, who see the world differently than we do is scary. It's a little death, to swallow our pride, to listen more than we speak. But this small act of courage can be our first step in following Jesus to the cross. We can choose to be vulnerable, to risk, to open ourselves to others.

It is a scary thing to imagine we might be like Judas, so caught up in our picture of God we end up betraying God. Let us insist on risking. Let's rejecting echo chambers. Let's be a place of strange friendships, where we all come together at God's table to learn from each other, to share with each other, to be transformed together.

It's difficult. It even hurts sometimes. But this pain is the pain of following Jesus - all the way to the Cross if need be.

Communion + Examen

1. When have you been a Matthew - when have you chosen to engage people who are different from you in love?
2. When have you been a Derek? When have you refused to engage people who you see as inferior?
3. Who in the next week will you be tempted to feel contempt for?
4. How can you choose to engage in a strange friendship this week?

[Communion Slide] This is God's dinner party, where we are transformed and invited to follow Jesus to the Cross. Jesus invited even Judas. Jesus invites even us. Together, we discover who God is as we follow him to the Cross.

Blessing

What strange friendships can you cultivate this week?

Who's around your table? Who needs to be?