

12 Disciples Series:
#7: Judas Thaddaeus: The Disciple with the Open Heart
John 14:15-23 (NRSV)
By John Gill

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” These are the words William Shakespeare placed on the lips of Romeo as he sears his love for Juliet, in his tragic love story. What’s in a name?

As we have already seen in our study of the twelve disciples of Jesus, a number of the apostles share names in common: There was Simon Peter and Simon the Zealot; there was James son of Zebedee and James son of Alphaeus; and there were the two Judases – Judas Iscariot and Judas “not Iscariot.” The disciple we will be focusing on this morning is this last disciple I mentioned – the one with that most unfortunate name in all of history – “Judas.”

How would you like to have the name, Judas? Actually, the name Judas is a fine name – it literally means “Jehovah leads.” But because the name has become tainted and despised, the Church has made every attempt to protect the reputation of this obscure, yet honorable disciple, who just happens to share a name with the betrayer of Jesus. This “Judas” has been called by several different names: so many in fact that one of the early church fathers, St. Jerome, dubbed him “Trinomious,” “the man with three names.” Besides the name “Judas,” in some places in scripture he is referred to as “Thaddaeus,” at other places, “Labbaeus.” Both were actually nicknames: Thaddaeus means “child at the breast” (as in a nursing baby), and Labbaeus means “child of the heart.”

It’s interesting to speculate just why Judas earned these nicknames. They could simply indicate that he was younger than the other disciples. Or perhaps he was innocent and childlike in spirit, with the kind of wide-eyed wonder and openness that Jesus taught that we all must have if we are to enter the Kingdom of God. Or maybe the nicknames were terms of derision – sort of like calling this Judas a “mamma’s boy” – spoiled and bratty. Unfortunately, the Bible doesn’t give us any real clues as to how he earned his nicknames.

And even when the Biblical writers DO refer to him by his real name, they have tried to differentiate between THIS “Judas” and the OTHER “Judas” so despised by the world. Luke calls him “Judas, son of James,” (perhaps even the son of James the disciple, which would also make him the nephew of the disciple John). Other traditions have used a variant of “Judas,” calling him “Jude,” even identifying him as a brother of Jesus himself, and crediting him with being the author of the Letter of Jude in the Bible.

It seems that all the Biblical writers have struggled to find a way to salvage this disciple’s reputation by giving him a new name and his own identity – all the Biblical writers – except John, that is. John seems less interested in helping his readers know who this Judas IS than he is in helping us know who he is NOT. He makes his point very clear – he simply refers to him as

“Judas, NOT Iscariot.” So in the interest of preserving this disciple’s good name, this morning let’s call him “Thaddaeus.”

Thaddaeus is one of those two or three very obscure disciples we know almost nothing about. Aside from his name (in one form or another) appearing in each of the lists of the disciples in the Gospels and in the Book of Acts, we find him mentioned in only one other place in the Bible: in the 14th chapter of John’s Gospel – and then only in passing. But in this brief exchange with Jesus, Thaddaeus discovered a wonderful truth – a truth that, I believe, changed his life.

Ironically, this conversation took place on the same night when that other Judas would betray Jesus. Meeting in the Upper Room with his disciples, Jesus had shared his Last Supper with them. And then, in that remarkable act of humility and servanthood, Jesus had washed his disciple’s feet. After the meal and the foot washing, John records a long and very intimate conversation Jesus had with his followers. Jesus talks about his coming death, and that he will be raised from the dead. He goes on to tell them about the future – that, even though he may be physically gone from them, his Spirit will be with his disciples always.

And then, out of the background, we hear the voice of this almost forgotten disciple – the one with the unfortunate name: Judas “Not Iscariot” breaks his silence and blurts out impulsively, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” And patiently – perhaps a little slower this time – Christ repeats almost verbatim what he has already said: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my father will love them...” (all that had been said before)... But then, there is this staggering announcement that is easily glossed over when we read this passage: Jesus adds these words: “...and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

What a remarkable notion! What an amazing thought! It is God’s most passionate desire to “make his home” in our hearts! “And, we will come to them,” Jesus says, “and MAKE OUR HOME – WITH THEM!”

“Home.” What comes to mind when you hear the word, “home?” The American Heritage Dictionary defines “home” like this: “A place where one lives - residence, habitation; One’s close family and one’s self; A person’s most personal relationships and possessions; An environment of haven, of shelter, of happiness and love.”

Jesus is saying something truly remarkable here – that our God is a lonesome God – a God who longs for a place to belong, a place to call “home.” And God wants to make his home - in our hearts!

Izzac Walton put it like this: “God has two dwellings – one in heaven, and the other in a meek and thankful heart.”

It is God’s greatest desire to set up residence within the hearts of his people. In Jeremiah 32:33, we are told that this is true: “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of

Israel after those days,' says the Lord: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'" Or as the Message Bible renders John 1:14 – "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

Isn't it astounding to realize that God wants to find within our souls "a haven, a shelter – happiness and love!" God wants a place where he can turn and find peace and joy – a restful place where love will welcome him and surround him – a place where he feels "at home!"

How amazing to think that the God of all creation – the Eternal, Omniscient, Omnipresent, Almighty God – is homeless, until he finds a home – in OUR hearts! It's hard to believe, but Jesus says it is true: "And we will come to them and make our home with them." Friends, if that doesn't make you feel important to God, I don't know what will!

So, in this scripture passage, we have seen that God wants to take up residence in our hearts. But, you know, God is a gentleman – he never forces himself on us, does he? We have to invite him in.

In the Book of Revelation (3:20) the Risen Christ paints a vivid picture of this when he says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me."

I'm sure you probably have seen the painting depicting this scene – of Jesus standing outside a door, knocking. As you study the painting, you notice something unusual about this door. There is no latch on the outside. The door can only be opened from within.

The sad thing is that, more often than not, we slam the door of our hearts in Jesus' face, leaving him homeless – out in the cold.

There is a Christian song by Ralph Carmichael that expresses this beautifully –

The Savior is waiting to enter your heart, Why don't you let him come in?
There's nothing in this world to keep you apart, What is your answer to him?
Time after time he has waited before, and now he is waiting again
To see if you're willing to open the door, O, how he wants to come in.

Years ago, there was a surgeon sitting beside the hospital bed of a very sick little boy. The boy's parents sat across from him. The surgeon began to explain what would be happening the next day: "Young man," the doctor began, "tomorrow morning I'll be opening up your heart..." The boy interrupted, "You'll find Jesus there!"

The surgeon looked up, annoyed. "I'll be exploring your heart to see how much damage has been done..."

"But when you open up my heart, you'll find Jesus there!"

The doctor looked to the parents, who sat quietly. “When I see how much damage has been done, I’ll sew your heart and chest back up, and I’ll plan what to do next.”

“But you’ll find Jesus in my heart. The Bible says he lives there. The hymns all say he lives there. You’ll find him in my heart.”

By this time, the surgeon had had enough. “I’ll tell you what I’ll find in your heart – I’ll find damaged muscles, low blood supply and weakened vessels.”

“You’ll find Jesus there, too! He lives there.” The doctor left.

The next evening, the surgeon sat in his office making a tape-recording of his notes from surgery. “...Damaged aorta, damaged pulmonary vein, widespread muscle degeneration. No hope of a transplant, no hope for a cure. Therapy: painkillers and bedrest. Prognosis...”

Here he paused. “Prognosis: death within one year.” He stopped the recorder. But there was so much more he needed to say... He wasn’t a praying man, but he found himself speaking out loud... “Why did you do this? You’ve put him here: you’ve put him in this pain; and now you’ve cursed him to an early death. Why?”

And the Lord answered him, and said, “The boy is my little lamb. He will not be part of your flock for long, for he is part of my flock – and he will be forever. Here in my flock, he will feel no pain, and will be comforted as you cannot imagine. His parents will one day join him here, and they too will know peace and joy for all eternity.”

The surgeon’s tears were hot, but his anger was hotter: “But you created that boy, and you created that heart. He’ll be dead in months. Why?”

And again, the Lord answered: “The boy, my little lamb, shall soon return to my flock – for he knows his shepherd! I did not put my lamb in your flock to lose him, but to find him and to welcome him home.”

The surgeon sat with his face in his hands – and wept.

The next morning, the surgeon again sat beside the boy’s bed, and again the boy’s parents sat across from him. The boy awoke and whispered, “Did you cut open my heart?” “Yes,” said the doctor. “What did you find?” asked the boy.

After a moment’s silence, he said, “I found Jesus there.”

What about you? Have you learned the lesson Thaddaeus learned in the Upper Room – that Jesus wants to make his home with you? If someone were to look deep into your heart, would they find Jesus there?

If not, what's stopping you? Right now in this moment, why don't you claim Jesus' promise?
"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them... and make our home with them."

"The Savior is waiting to enter your heart. Why don't you let him come in?"

Don't slam the door in Jesus' face and leave him out in the cold. Open the door. Jesus wants to make his home in your heart – if you'll let him in.