

Spy Wednesday  
19 March 2008  
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One of the things that inevitably happens when someone has a moral failing is that we tend to be rather pessimistic about their chances for rehabilitation.

We even have a term of derision for a “conversion” that seems just a little too convenient... Jail House Religion... we call it. Dire straits produce dramatic results... as in there are no atheists in foxholes.

Perhaps we have been desensitized. We have seen Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart and countless other fallen religious leaders cry just a bit too publicly, just a bit too effectively, just a little too directly into the camera. Their contrition does not move us. On the contrary, we harden our hearts.

And let's not even TALK about our political leaders! After all, didn't Elliot Spitzer run as a “moral” reformer?

Our reaction is understandably harsh...They must have been rotten to the core, we think to ourselves.... A crook the whole time... and imagine that they ever dared to preach to anyone. Hypocrites, liars and cheats, the whole lot of them.

That is how we often react. But we are probably often wrong in our assessment.

For people do not start out life “rotten to the core”. We are born with the propensity, but actual sin takes hold of us little by little, distorting and corrupting by degrees.

And surely this was the case with Judas Iscariot. We can scarcely think of anyone named Judas today... just as Benedict Arnold, and Fr. Patrick's “turncoat ancestor” Levi Allen... and William Tecumseh Sherman are not high on our lists.

But in 1st century Israel, “Judas” would have been a most common name, and any parent who gave it to a child would have had high hopes for him. After all, Judas Maccabeus was a folk hero. It was he who had cleansed the Temple during the reign of the evil Anthiochus Epiphanes.

So Judas Iscariot would have been a child of promise... someone from whom much was expected... at least by his parents who named him... and by Jesus who called him, trusted him, befriended him. There surely must have been good within Judas Iscariot.

So what went wrong?

Well two things we know for sure.

Judas became greedy.  
And Judas became impatient.

We don't know why he stole money from the disciples' alms box... maybe he just wanted to buy a sandwich...

But whatever the reason, I am certain that Judas found some way to make it right in his own eyes.

It was the German theologian Philipp Melanchthon who said, The eye sees, the will obtains, and the mind justifies.

We are all very adept at justifying.

That is the way temptation works.

David saw the beauty of Bathsheba, but he did not foresee the tragic consequences that would result from acting on his impulse.

Judas knew what he wanted... he just didn't know truly what it would cost.

And what he wanted was religion on his terms. He wanted God to act exactly according to his timetable.

And every time he gave in to one of these prideful impulses, the bright young Judas Iscariot who had shown such promise became more and more a tragic and twisted caricature of his former self.

Until Satan had full reign in his heart, and like the thief that he had become... he darted from the Upper Room into the darkness of night, the morsel from the hand of Jesus still moist in his mouth.

You see there is nothing more tragic than what might have been. "Opportunities lost" haunt our dreams. What might we have done for our children if we were home more often? What might we have done for an elderly loved one if we had been more attentive? What might have been our joy if only we had been less selfish?

Did any of you see the cover story in last Sunday's Parade magazine? The actress Jody Foster was on the cover. She is a talented actress, but she has spent a lifetime insulating herself from hurt. She grew up without a father. She has raised a child alone... and all the while she believed that she was becoming stronger, more independent, more self sufficient. But after a certain birthday, no matter how successful, a person begins to wonder if the "good life" is really all that good. The caption under her picture said simply and sadly... "I am ready to love someone more than I love myself"...

The world is full of what might have been... if only our hearts had been more open.

But Judas squandered his chance. He didn't sell Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. He sold himself. And in the end, he counted his life as so little worth that he ended it with a rope of sorrow and despair.

It is a pitiful story, isn't it? And you and I couldn't wring a happy ending out of it if we tried for a lifetime.

There is no happiness on this Spy Wednesday...but there is redemption. Redemption for you and me, and for all of us who hope in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

For Judas, the story ends. But for us, we are just at the beginning.

Tomorrow, we will go again to the upper room.... and to the Garden... and to the courtyard... and on Friday to the Cross. To the cross where all our failures are carried. To the cross where even our most disfiguring corruptions are healed. To the Cross that proves that our lives are more than thirty pieces of silver, for they have been redeemed by an infinite price.

And for every lost opportunity, a new chance is given.  
And for every broken relationship, the hope of a new day is offered,  
And for every kiss of betrayal, a kiss of peace is returned.

And we can all hope... maybe we can hope... that somewhere in the nether regions of the depth of the universe, in

that dark place between life and death... that Judas Iscariot himself saw the face of His Lord, and heard, peradventure, a last chance offered... Judas, son of Simon... Do you love me more than these...?

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AMEN