

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Judas: The Ultimate Betrayer?**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**August 19, 2007**



There may be no more fascinating or more reviled character in the Bible than Judas. He betrayed his friend and spiritual teacher. From the Christian perspective, he betrayed the incarnation of God. And he did it with a kiss.

He is by nearly all accounts the ultimate betrayer. Whether we despise Judas or come to feel sorry for him, it is hard not to have strong feelings.

I would like there to be some reason, some justification, something that would make his disloyalty make some sense to me. Any of us who have ever been betrayed by a friend, partner, spouse, or family member knows how hard it is to come to grips with a betrayal. It can be especially difficult when there are no adequate explanations. The pain can seem unbearable and the emotional scars long-lasting.

This is also true if we have been the one who has betrayed another person. The guilt can be overwhelming. It can be nearly impossible to forgive ourselves.

Yet, as much as we may want to understand why someone betrayed us or even why we betrayed them, we don't always know. It may be greed, revenge, jealousy, lust, or something else. The betrayal may be premeditated or completely unintentional. Whatever the reason, we are likely to portray the other person or ourselves as a villain, even as someone beyond redemption or forgiveness, as in the case of Judas.

His story can be found in the four New Testament gospels - Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Much of the basic plot comes from the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four. The other three gospels use Mark as their starting point.

In Mark, we learn that Judas, one of the twelve disciples, went to the chief priests offering to betray Jesus to them. The author provides no motive for him doing this, and we are left to imagine one for ourselves. Judas's fate likewise remains a mystery.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew appears to be dissatisfied by the lack of motive and provides one. The motive he offers is greed. In Matthew, Judas negotiates with the chief priests for money. Judas asked them: "What will you give me if I betray [Jesus] to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver." (Mt 23:34-35).

The author of Matthew goes one step further to also explain Judas's fate. We learn that:

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. (Mt 27:3-5)

## **Judas: The Ultimate Betrayer? (cont'd.)**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**

Unable to forgive himself for what he had done, Judas committed suicide.

The author of the Gospel of Luke seemed dissatisfied with the way both Mark and Matthew handled a motive. And so in Luke, a different motive is given. The author of Luke attributes the betrayal to the supernatural power of evil, writing that “Satan entered into Judas Iscariot” (Luke 22:3). The Gospel of John similarly attributes Judas’s actions to evil.

Whatever the reason for the betrayal, all four gospels agree that Judas betrayed Jesus as part of the unfolding of a divine plan. It was a plan that required the death of Jesus.

But did Judas really betray Jesus? There is now reason to wonder. In the 1970s peasants found a papyrus book in a burial cave in Middle Egypt.

In April 2006 National Geographic Society announced the archeological discovery of the Gospel of Judas. It had been preserved in a limestone box. It dates to the fourth century, but turns out to be a translation of a second-century Greek text.

In 2007, Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King issued their book, Reading Judas, in which they explore the implications and meaning of the text.

What is remarkable about the discovery of the Gospel of Judas is it calls into question the idea that Judas is the ultimate betrayer. It seems Judas may have gotten a bad rep all these years.

The Gospel of Judas challenges 2000 year old assumptions and brings to light a different motive for Judas’s actions. Rather than acting out of greed or under supernatural influences, Judas is said to act out of loyalty.

According to this new gospel, Jesus entrusted Judas to initiate the events that would lead to his death. Jesus issued the instructions for Judas to turn him over to the armed men. Judas was being an obedient servant. Rather than being a treacherous villain, Judas was Jesus’s closest and most trusted confidant.

At first this may seem a bit strange. How could he be loyal and still hand over his teacher to armed men? Pagels and King explain in their book that:

Once we see that all the New Testament gospels treat Judas’s betrayal as God’s will, it seems less strange to think that Judas might have been seen as following Jesus’s instructions in handing him over, as the Gospel of Judas says.

This new twist on Judas’s character is a fascinating reversal of an idea that has largely been unquestioned. It offers a very different interpretation for Judas’s actions. And I have to admit, something about the idea that Judas may have acted in loyalty appeals to me. None of us likes to believe that one person betrays another person close to them – for whatever reason.

Something about this turn about reminds me of the time we have been wrong in our assessments. I think of the cases in which new evidence exonerated individuals on death row. There is the

## **Judas: The Ultimate Betrayer? (cont'd.)**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**

possibility, no matter how slim sometimes, that we misconstrued the facts or simply were blinded by our own emotions. Notably, in this version, Judas doesn't hang himself. The other disciples stone him to death.

The Gospel of Judas does something else even more remarkable than calling into question the role of Judas as a betrayer. It diverges from the dominant theology of the time in notable ways.

For one thing, it refutes sacrifice and martyrdom of others. It shares with the New Testament gospels the understanding that Jesus's death was necessary. But it does not extend this to other people. Some church leaders were actually glorifying individuals who sacrificed their lives for the Christian faith and denouncing those who objected.

The author of the Gospel of Judas did not share the belief that God required suffering and sacrifice. He questioned what kind of God would require violent bloodshed in exchange for forgiveness. The Gospel of Judas described martyrdom as "an abyss of madness and blasphemy against Christ."

The Gospel of Judas also rejects the belief in bodily resurrection. Emphasis is placed not on a bodily resurrection but a spiritual transformation. The Gospel of Judas teaches that the body will die but the spirit will live on.

Finally, like many of the Gnostic gospels, written around the same time, the Gospel of Judas teaches that God is within. Jesus explains to Judas that everyone has received a divine spirit.

Whether we agree with these beliefs or not, we can appreciate that Christianity seemed to have space for some widely divergent theological perspectives and even contradictory interpretations.

By challenging Judas's disloyalty, his role as the most trusted disciple, and by presenting unorthodox theological interpretations, the Gospel of Judas calls into question the idea that early Christianity was a single unified institution.

It is not alone in this respect. In the last few decades nearly 150 new manuscripts from early Christian times have been discovered. They suggest a more diverse early Christianity than was once envisioned. Manuscripts like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and now the Gospel of Judas do not conform to what later became orthodox Christianity. It is no wonder it took so long to unearth them.

There existence was possible in the first place only because in the first few centuries there wasn't yet a creed, a biblical canon of texts, or an agreed upon church hierarchy. That wouldn't happen until around 313 under Constantine.

Yet there were those who wanted desperately to establish a unified institution. They worked pretty hard to create one. Anything that seemed to undermine this effort was deemed heretical and silenced. The Gospel of Judas, for example, was labeled "a piece of fiction intended merely to confuse people." And it was driven into hiding – until recently.

## **Judas: The Ultimate Betrayer? (cont'd.)**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**

The differing interpretations and theological perspectives presented in texts like the Gospel of Judas were feared by those in power. They thought disputes and disagreements over belief would fragment and possibly split the faith.

In fairness, they had reason to worry. Today we see Christianity as a powerful worldwide religion. But at that time, it was a small fragile sect in danger of persecution and even annihilation by the Romans.

This gospel is a product of its time, place, and culture. It shares some of the problems of the other New Testament gospels. For example, it contains anti-Jewish and homophobic attitudes.

Nevertheless, the existence of the Gospel of Judas along with other newly found manuscripts expands our knowledge and understanding of Christian history. It confirms a diversity of Christian expression in the early church on issues like martyrdom and resurrection, as well as different interpretations of events.

I welcome these differing interpretations. They enlarge my understanding of the world, of Christianity, and of Jesus – rather than threatening it. As Pagels and King say:

Exploring these discoveries ... offers more than insight onto our past and present; it also opens up a far wider range of visions than we had ever imagined of what Jesus – and his teaching – might mean.

This new gospel opens up new possibilities to us. It sparks my imagination about the Christian tradition in which we collectively have historic roots, in which I personally have religious roots, and which which continues to be one of the great living sources of our faith. As new and exciting discoveries continue to be unearthed, may we be open to what these new possibilities have to offer.

Source: [Reading Judas](#), Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King