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On Holy Thursday, betrayal and friendship

John Dear | Mar. 27, 2012 On the Road to Peace

After Jesus offers the bread and cup as his body and blood in a new covenant of nonviolence in the upper room during the Holy Thursday Passover meal, he quietly announces that one of the 12 will betray him. He can see the handwriting on the wall. The disciples immediately deny that they would do such a thing -- and then they break into a nasty fight about which one of them is the greatest. Jesus has only hours left to live, but these arrogant, ignorant churchmen ignore his sufferings and focus on themselves instead. Not much has changed 2,000 years later. Betrayal, denial, argument and abandonment of Jesus seem to be the norm.

Rarely do people speak of the betrayal of Jesus and the continuing betrayals that occur today, or, for that matter, the breakdown of Jesus' community for clues to the ongoing breakdown of the church today. Given the 30 million people who have left the Catholic church in the United States in the last few years and the widespread anger, hostility, dissension and arguments that tear us apart, I thought I would look at this painful theme of betrayal.

Of course, Jesus is betrayed by a close friend, Judas Iscariot, a member of his tight inner circle, his core community of peace, love and nonviolence. One of the psalms even suggests that the Messiah's betrayer would be his closest friend. Judas, we're told in John's Gospel, held the community purse and regularly stole from it. In Matthew's version, we're told he approached the religious and imperial authorities to inquire about handing Jesus over to them. "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" he asks. (26:15). "They paid him thirty pieces of silver and from that time on he looked for an opportunity to hand him over," Matthew writes.

"Satan entered him," we're told elsewhere. "Satan" was often a code name for the Roman empire: that is, the demonic spirit of violence, war, oppression and death. Some say Judas didn't know what he was doing, but I think he was a greedy agent of the empire who wanted Jesus in the hands of the imperial authorities.

In John's arrest account, Judas arrives with "a large crowd, with swords and clubs, who had come from the chief priests and the elders of the people." The soldiers and authorities expect violence from the Jesus community, and in fact, they got it. Peter takes up the sword to lead the charge and start the killing. If Jesus hadn't commanded Peter to put down the sword, there might have been a bloodbath. Judas famously identifies Jesus by kissing him. Some say that as Mediterranean men, that's how they greeted one another. Others suggest that Judas had to identify Jesus because none of the authorities and soldiers knew what the famous Jesus looked like. He could have been any one of the Galilean fishermen.

Certainly Judas mocks Jesus, as if he were the emperor, by exclaiming "Hail, rabbi!" "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Humanity with a kiss?" Jesus sorrowfully asks in Luke's version. Notice: In every version, Jesus discusses the betrayal and responds to it with peace, nonviolence and sorrowful resignation. "Friend, do what you have come for," he says in Matthew (26:50). Nonviolent to the end, Jesus calls the one who destroys him a friend. He does not write anyone off.

How did Jesus feel being betrayed by his close friend? How did he feel having his community break up and

abandon him? What was he thinking as he saw the collapse of everything he worked for? It's shocking that this violent turn of events happens, in Henri Nouwen's words, just as Jesus was moving in closer to the disciples, during that intimate moment of communion with his community. Jesus must have been absolutely devastated, as we read in the accounts of his agonizing prayer in Gethsemane. He's hurt, scared, sad, depressed and broken. He relies completely on his beloved God, and through that long prayer, he is able to remain calm, gentle and nonviolent until the end.

Sometimes I think every follower of the nonviolent Jesus sooner or later experiences betrayal from the church. And perhaps we betray others, too. We do not suffer the great mythic betrayal that Jesus underwent, of course, but we do experience small betrayals. As we watch the breakdown of the institutional church and the expansion of our war-making empire, we might ask ourselves: When have we been betrayed? Who betrayed us and how? How did we respond to the little betrayals we experienced within the church? Have we been as nonviolent as Jesus? More, whom have we betrayed? These are important Lenten questions to ponder.

As I travel the nation these days and meet good people everywhere, over and again I hear how good people feel betrayed by church leaders, whether in regard to issues of justice and peace, women and gays and lesbians, or local parish closings or administrative issues. So many feel betrayed. So many are hurt. So many are angry. So many are walking away.

Given the details of the story, I wonder if any Christian's cooperation with the empire is a betrayal of Christ. If Christ is present today in the poor, the marginalized, the enemy, in the children of Afghanistan, Palestine, Pakistan, Syria and Mexico -- then any time we support the American empire that oppresses, hurts and kills children, we are betraying Christ. Those who supported the U.S. killing of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children in the last 20 years, from sanctions to war, for example, certainly betrayed as well as crucified Christ.

As we name this experience, the way forward comes by focusing our attention on the nonviolent Jesus. We need to remain calm, peaceful and nonviolent like him and pray over this, even in agony, that the will of the God of peace be done. We want to remain centered in that Spirit of peace, love and nonviolence and faithful to that Spirit for the rest of our lives. This Holy Thursday/Good Friday world offers us the chance to rise to the occasion, so to speak -- to remain nonviolent like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus and to offer boundless compassion and universal love like Jesus.

"The only way to become wise is through betrayal," poet Robert Bly once said. That's a powerful insight. If we can work through our betrayals as Jesus did -- through deep prayer, love, understanding, forgiveness and mindfulness -- we will discover a new wisdom and a deeper peace. I think we will enter upon a new plain of compassion that we never knew existed.

Perhaps an even greater challenge is the bottom-line requirement that we, too, not betray Jesus. We want to be, in a clumsy expression, "non-betrayers" -- that is, faithful followers of the nonviolent Jesus. Even if everyone else in the world betrays, denies and abandons him, we want to stay faithful. We want to stay close to Jesus in all our work, in all our struggles with the church, as peacemakers -- all the way to the cross, the empty tomb and back to the upper room. That means we need to resist war, injustice and empire every step of the way.

I'm not sure what that looks like, because according to the Gethsemane story, whether we're like Judas who betrays Jesus, Peter who denies Jesus, or all the disciples -- men and women -- who run away from him, sooner or later, everyone abandons him. It's only because of his generous nonviolence when he returns to us with the hand of peace, love and forgiveness after his death that the community regroups and takes up where he left off.

There are hundreds of Gospel themes -- such as peace, love and unity -- to ponder in our Holy Thursday texts. I'll just mention one other: the gift of friendship. Even as his community breaks down into betrayal and argument, Jesus says with touching warmth that he no longer calls them servants or slaves -- from now on, they

are his *friends*. "I want to be your friend," he says. We have a gentle, loving, nonviolent God who wants to be our friend. According to the story, everyone rejects that hand of friendship.

This Lent, we could ask ourselves: Do we want to be friends with God, with Jesus? What part of us gets frightened by the political implications of eucharistic nonviolence and wants to run away from God? What would it mean to be a friend of Jesus, to keep his new covenant of nonviolence, to understand that friendship in the political context of his impending arrest and execution, to refuse to betray or deny him? As his friend, dare we join his campaign of nonviolent resistance against war and injustice, even if it will disrupt our lives?

"The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority are addressed as 'rulers,' but among you it shall not be so," Jesus teaches us in the midst of our argument. "Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant...I am among you as the one who serves." (Luke 22:25-27)

We could continue the argument, lord it over others and betray, deny and abandon Jesus all over again, but as we ponder Jesus' wise nonviolence, I hope instead we find faith, strength and courage to discover a greater wisdom and become mature Christians who undergo our own modern-day Paschal Mystery with transforming nonviolence. As we learn to serve selflessly like Jesus and join his underground movement of nonviolent resistance to injustice and war, we may finally let go of our egos, resentments and fear and accept his hand of friendship.

Befriending the God of peace, we may yet learn, is the greatest wisdom of all.

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John Dear will speak March 28 in Tulsa, Okla.; March 29 in St. Louis; and March 30 in Chicago. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [1], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [3] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[4]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[5]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[6]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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