

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
20 August 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
12th Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Judas Iscariot”

Eleventh sermon in the summer series, “Seeing Ourselves in the Twelve”

*Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16, 20-28; John 12:1-8; John 13:21-30;
John 18:1-8; Matthew 27:1-10; Acts 1:15-20*

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment. Today's manuscript in particular is over twice as long as the preached sermon; I left the original content in for background but I encourage you to listen to the sermon at calvarydenver.org because it differs quite a bit from what you read here.

Content warning: Today's scripture readings and sermon content include discussion of suicide.

A content warning as I begin.
As you heard in the Scripture readings, today's sermon includes discussion of suicide. If this is a tender or sensitive topic for you, please do what you need to care for yourself, including leaving the sanctuary at any point or turning off the livestream if you need to. And if you are experiencing thoughts of ending your life, know you are not alone – either in having those thoughts or in processing through what to do with them. You may call 988 (the national suicide and crisis hotline) or reach out to your mental health professional, if you have one, or you can speak with me or another pastor and we can help direct you to appropriate care. Or even tell a family member or friend. Let someone know you are hurting and need help. Your life matters.

With that, we turn to our disciple for today, Judas Iscariot, whose life holds great meaning for us...even if it's his death that usually gets all the attention.

Judas Iscariot was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. No one really knows for sure what “Iscariot” means, but most believe it indicates the town Judas was from – Kerioth. If this is true, this means that Judas Iscariot is the only disciple from Judea (all the others are from Galilee).¹

Iscariot was most likely used as an epithet because there were many other people named Judas. It was a common name; there are three people named Judas in the gospels (2 are disciples and 1 is Jesus' half-brother), and altogether there are eight people

¹ Ryan Nelson, “Who Was Judas Iscariot? The Beginner's Guide,” *Overviewbible.com* (4 March 2019),

accessed on August 19, 2023 at <https://overviewbible.com/judas-iscariot/>.

named Judas in the New Testament!²

But it is not Iscariot that forever defines this Judas for us, is it? Judas is who we know – and ALL people for ALL of time know – as “The Betrayer.” There was never meant to be any question for us about who Judas was or rather WHAT he did. The gospel writers spared no suspense about Judas Iscariot. Right off the bat in their gospels they tell us he is – “the one who betrayed Jesus” (in Matthew 10:4), the one “who handed Jesus over” (in Mark 3:19), and the one “who became a traitor.” (Luke 6:16).

Judas Iscariot is always listed *last* in the line of disciples, as if to say, “oh yeah, and then there’s *that* guy.” Before we, the reader, get a chance to know Judas for anything else, we are told of his betrayal. In contrast, think of Thomas who we know had doubts yet is not listed at the beginning of the disciples’ journey as “the doubter,” or Peter who denied Jesus three times but who is not called “the denier,” or James & John, the “guys with big egos” who wanted to sit on Jesus’ left and right in heaven but who are not

called “the selfish or self-important” ones.

Other disciples make mistakes. Other disciples hurt Jesus. Yet only Judas Iscariot is condemned to forever be known only by his action of betrayal. Only Judas never has a chance to be known for anything else that he most assuredly was – a faithful follower of Jesus, one who said “yes” when Jesus called – giving up profession and family to follow. He witnessed miracles and was sent out two by two into villages to share the gospel and heal the sick. He sat through teachings on the mount and he helped out on the disciples’ boat when it was tossing and turning out at sea. And – he was given the responsibility of Treasurer, or keeping the “common purse” of the disciples, which indicates a significant level of competence and trust.

But instead of remembering all these things, Judas Iscariot has become for us our Scapegoat. The one who takes the biggest blame for being a disciple who hurts Jesus in the biggest way possible...who does the Wrong of all Wrongs...whose Sin is so egregious he must be replaced

² Nelson, *ibid*.

by another. Judas Iscariot becomes the one to whom we can all point and say, *“Well I may have messed up...but at least I’m not like Judas.”*

I’m not like Judas – he betrayed Jesus, he sold him out for a few pieces of silver, I would never do that. And yet, I look at my life and my financial choices and can easily say, *“yes, there are many times I choose my own comfort (something I don’t really need) over the call of Christ (providing for those in need).”*

We say, *“Judas, what a traitor, he followed Jesus’ around for three years and then turned on him in an instant – all for what? A little profit or fame? How disloyal and unloving is that?”* And yet, I don’t know about you but I look at my life and the ebbs and flows of my commitment to Christ and can easily say, *“I’ve been following Jesus – not just three years but over three decades! – and I have betrayed that relationship time and time again!”* I have betrayed Christ choosing myself over knowing him or talking about him in any kind of meaningful way (especially on airplanes) and by passively allowing people to speak of Jesus in ways that do not reflect

his life or love (using his name for politics or profit) without speaking up or standing up for what he has taught me.”

It's a curious thing. How we curse and condemn Judas, and yet, *see ourselves so clearly in him* – again and again.

Judas, even when he knows that *Jesus knows* what he is going to do, and even when Jesus says to him, *“go and do what you’re going to do quickly”* – Judas still goes and does it. It’s like being caught with your hand in the cookie jar and instead of putting the cookie back and backpedaling saying, *“oh I wasn’t going to eat the cookie, I was just checking to see if they were still fresh”* you unabashedly eat the cookie right in front of the one who caught you! You are caught before you do the Thing and yet you do the Thing anyway. This is Judas. He is so utterly human. Which makes him so utterly like us.

Judas, caved to the moment; took advantage of the opportunity to make some quick cash, approaching the chief priests and elders (who were looking for a way to arrest Jesus when he was alone and not in a crowd) asked, *“how much if I show you where you can get to*

Jesus easily?” And when they tell him the price, Judas decides 30 pieces of silver was worth the risk, worth the relationship, and he betrays Jesus with a kiss. Sure, he seems like a character out of the Godfather or some other mob movie, but as we’ve seen this week in indictment after indictment of so many government leaders for conspiracy and racketeering – including our former President – you can be one of The Most Important People in the World and still feel the need to protect and prove your position and power and worth through “behind the scenes” means – no matter the cost, no matter the laws broken, no matter the damage done, no matter the integrity lost. Judas isn’t the only one who looks for an opportunity to serve himself instead of serving others is he? Lord help us all.

Interestingly, in John’s gospel Judas asked a question about why such expensive perfume was used to anoint Jesus, when that money could have been used for the poor. He might have actually cared about the poor – just as other disciples did. Curiously, in Matthew and Mark’s account of this story it is some or all of the disciples who ask this question collectively,

not Judas Iscariot singularly – so one wonders what role Judas’ eventual betrayal of Jesus played in how people remembered and recorded this story later, particularly for John – who was the latest of the gospel writers. Because John, we know, uses the incident to add a parenthetical comment we don’t see in the other texts: *“He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it,”* (John 12:6).

We have no other accounts of Judas stealing anything. And I tend to think that if he was stealing from the common purse and people knew about it – that three years into this discipleship journey – he wouldn’t still be in charge of the money – but who knows. It’s impossible to know whether he shaved money off the top or slipped himself a buck or two when people weren’t looking. That’s part of the problem with a label like “betrayal” or “traitor” that is given to Judas based on one egregious choice. It colored the way everybody looked at what he did before that moment, and after it too.

But, as we read, there weren’t too many moments after the

betrayal to analyze. Because Judas dies by suicide. And this is where we perhaps see ourselves most clearly in him, and most tenderly, and most tragically too. Because most, if not all, of us either know someone who has died by suicide and/or we ourselves have had suicidal thoughts ourselves or perhaps even attempted suicide.

To question one's worth and whether life is worth living is a very human thing. Just as Judas' suicide is pushed under the rug...so too are the suicides of our loved ones and the suicidal thoughts we secretly harbor. The stigma and shame of suicide keeps us silent about it. Which is tragic because the resounding echoes of its effect reverberate loudly for years in our hearts.

As tragic as his death is, the fact that one of Jesus' disciples died by suicide shows us we need not be silent about it. Suicide says nothing of one's faithfulness as a follower of Jesus; it merely reveals how alone and desperate one felt in a certain moment in time.

And Judas had this moment – a moment where he couldn't see a way forward, but only how he

had messed up the past. You see, when Judas actually saw Jesus being bound and condemned, he repented. We don't hear this part of the story very often do we? No, we think of him as the betrayer, but he was remorseful, and clearly very conflicted and disturbed.

Who knows why he betrayed Jesus in the first place. Maybe he never thought Jesus would actually be crucified; he had seen Jesus save other people and perform miraculous healings after all – maybe he thought the betrayal wasn't that big of a deal because Jesus would save himself from this mess and it was only a matter of time before the chief priests would find a way to arrest him anyway. Maybe Judas just thought he was expediting something that was already a foregone conclusion; after all Jesus told the disciples multiple times that he would be arrested, tried, crucified, and resurrected. Maybe Judas is just the disciple who actually believed what Jesus said and thought – the compassionate thing to do here is to speed this whole thing up and turn him over to the authorities.

In fact, in *The Gospel of Judas*, written in 2nd or 3rd century, it

says that Judas knew something that the other disciples didn't and that he was actually a good guy and was "in" on this whole thing with Jesus. *The Gospel of Judas* is a Gnostic text (a text that emphasize special/secret knowledge) which contains conversations between Jesus and Judas Iscariot where Jesus instructs Judas to betray him, and that Judas was the only one [disciple] who truly understood Jesus' message. The veracity of this text is widely disputed, because when would Judas himself have had time to write this gospel if he died around the same time as Jesus? Perhaps it was just someone writing in his name or memory, but how would they have known about this secret pact with Jesus? The Gospel is also in more than 1,000 pieces and more than half of the original text has been lost, so we don't have the full context, which further calls this theory into question.³ However, in John's account we do read Jesus saying, "*Do quickly what you are going to do,*" (John 13:27), which could support this theory that Judas and Jesus were in on this together.

In the end, it's all just a curious

thought experiment because in truth, whatever the motive or intention of Judas' betrayal, when Judas saw the actual consequences of his kiss – he was devastated. It's like he felt like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders and that the entirety of Jesus' crucifixion was because of his one action. Of course, logically that is not true, not emotionally that is what he must have felt.

The truth is, Jesus could have saved himself if he wanted to perhaps, and he had been saying this was the plan all along – so while Judas certainly sped up the process and hurt Jesus immensely by betraying him – some say it was gonna happen anyway. And then we read in John's gospel that, "Satan entered him" that Judas wasn't really acting out of his truest self, he was being used to bring about what was already going to be brought about anyway. But we have to be really careful about espousing this type of theology – not only because it puts blame on "Satan or the devil" instead of human agency and choice – but also because this is a comment not made by Jesus himself but by the Gospel writer of John – who is writing

³ Nelson, *ibid.*

way after the fact and trying to give an explanation for how Judas could do such a horrible thing.

And it's almost beside the point because even if "Satan was in him" at some point, he had definitely left quickly, because almost immediately Judas feels regret, goes to the chief priests and elders and gives them the money back and admits his sin – but his repentance is met with dismissal. He's mocked and sent off to deal with his grief and regret himself. And without resources or a support network to deal with this reality, Matthew said, Judas went and hanged himself.

One has to wonder if Jesus' words, as recorded in Matthew, were ringing in his ears: *"but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born,"* (Matthew 26:23).

Scholars debate back and forth what this verse actually means,⁴

⁴ So often this verse has been translated as: "good were it for *that man* if *he* had never been born – in which case "he" and "that man" are the same person – Judas. This is an inaccurate translation of the Greek which leads us to interpret the verse as: it would be better for Judas if Judas had never been born. But that is NOT the word order in the Greek order. The manuscript word order is: *"...good were it for him if that man had never been born."* In that order "him" and "that man" are NOT the same person. "Him" refers to Jesus, and "that man"

but none of that debate would have mattered to Judas. He would have heard Jesus' words at face value – he would have heard Jesus say it was better for him not to have been born. Can you even imagine? Man do our words have impact, despite our best intentions.

Would Judas have died by suicide had Jesus not said that? We will never know. Had the chief priests and elders accepted his 30 pieces of silver back and said they forgave Judas or had they released Jesus would Judas have not died by suicide? We really will never know. Maybe, maybe not.

But you see these types of the questions and wonderings are why suicide is such a deep and painful mystery. The loved ones of those who have died question and wonder if something they could have said or done would have prevented their loved ones death. Or if they said something or did something they shouldn't have. They wonder if THEY caused the suicide of their loved

refers to Jesus. Jesus does often speak of himself in the third person, so that is not odd, and this statement makes much more sense – it would be better for Jesus (in this moment) if Judas hadn't been born (because, of course, Jesus wouldn't have been handed over to his enemies). This is not a statement about the worthiness of Judas' life, but rather is a statement (a very human one) of how Jesus felt in this moment about the effect Judas' actions had on his life.

one. But the truth is – when someone is in such a despairing place where death is seen as the only relief or option to stop the pain they are feeling – they are often not able to hear what their loved ones around them are saying.

This is not to say we shouldn't intervene when someone is depressed or suicidal – not at all. We should speak very honestly and forthright about it, asking directly if someone is having thoughts of suicide or if they have a plan for their own death. Sometimes we feel that in asking those questions, we might bring up the idea of suicide to them and cause it to happen. But the opposite is true. When we ask directly about suicide we are honoring the depth of pain someone is in – often they feel seen for the very despairing place they are in – by asking we are validating their feelings, not dismissing them. Finally, perhaps, someone is taking them seriously and truly seeing the depth of their pain.

The truth is, asking a question about suicide will not make a non-suicidal person all the sudden want to die by suicide. Whereas asking a question about suicide to someone who is suicidal might just save their life

as it gives an opportunity for intervention and connection.

By the way – I'm intentionally not using the language of "committing suicide" as that implies that suicide is a crime. Using the language of "commit" can also unintentionally support a theology that says people who die by suicide are not forgiven or redeemed or are going to hell. But suicide is not a crime, and nor does how one dies forever define how they lived. In fact, when we are suffering, that is when it seems God is most close to us and we are most close to Christ's own experience of suffering on the cross. In and through great pain, great healing and salvation can come. It doesn't make the pain or isolation or desperation any easier to endure. But it does give us a theology of hope and life that is far greater than the manner in which we suffer or die.

After all, the manner in which Judas dies isn't even all that clear. Matthew says Judas hanged himself and that the chief priests use the money Judas returned to them to buy a field. Matthew, with his proclivity to quote Hebrew scriptures for his Jewish audience, connects this to

prophecies from Zechariah and Jeremiah, calling it the Field of Blood – a burial ground for foreigners.

In Luke's account in Acts, Judas is the one who buys the field and it seems he died by jumping off of something (perhaps a cliff?) – or some say perhaps he hanged himself and then was thrown off a cliff. Who knows. But in Acts, the field is called the Field of Blood because of Judas' blood.

The point is, sadly, there is more talk of the manner of Judas' death and the place of his death and the reason for his death "the betrayal" – than there is of all the other moments in his life. He is forever labeled as "the one who betrayed" Jesus, and thus forever reduced to his biggest mistake or misstep.

We cannot say that being labeled "the betrayer" led to his decision to die by suicide – as that label came after this death and is merely in all the writing about him. But it is undeniable through his choice to die by suicide in that moment of deep pain and regret that he knew this was the type of action that might follow him the rest of his life...that he might never escape from it in terms of reputation or

quality of life. Not because Jesus would not forgive him, but because his friends and the rest of Jesus' followers wouldn't. The ones who are taught to forgive, just as Jesus forgave, often struggle to do so, don't we?

Though we don't get to see how Judas' friends would have reacted to his betrayal to his face, by the way the gospel writers, all of whom were disciples, chose to write about Judas – labeling him only as 'the betrayer' and speaking only of his actions of theft and deceit – give us a pretty good idea that Judas would have had a very hard time of it. His friends would not have forgiven him easily, if at all. Even after he died this tragically, where was their compassion for him? Especially from someone like Peter – who had denied Jesus, not one time, but three times?

I think this is why I feel so tenderly toward Judas. It's because of the label he is given to bear forever. He is defined by one action, and not by his life. And in so doing, he is dehumanized; defined by a behavior and not his belovedness. When we call someone a "criminal," rather than "one who is convicted or a

crime"... when we call someone "homeless" instead of "one who is experiencing homelessness"... when we call someone an "inmate" instead of "one who is incarcerated"... when we call someone "mentally ill" instead of "one who is living with a mental health illness or one who is experiencing anxiety or depression"... when we call someone an "addict" instead of saying "one who is living with a substance use disorder" or "one who struggles with addiction"... when we use any of these labels – we define someone by ONE aspect of their being instead of by their entire personhood. In contrast, we dignify people by recognizing the fullness of their being, not just one aspect of it.

Think about it. If someone does something wrong, and we call them a "criminal" – that further reinforces their behavior as THE defining part of their identity and as who society sees them as forever. But surely that is not what we want? Don't we want for people who have committed crimes to reform, repent, and change? If so, why do we call people "criminals?" It's as if we are defining not only who we

think they are now but who we want them to be forever.

Surely – we wouldn't want for our own life or family, right? So why do we so easily use these type of categorical labels for others? Well, because it helps us see "those people" as different from us. It helps us make sense of their behavior as "deranged" or wrong; "good people" wouldn't do those thing. Yet, like Judas people who commit crimes are people. We do not know the entirety of their story. And the language we use about them matters because if one hears that they are a "criminal" studies show they increasingly believe that is WHO they are and WHO they will ALWAYS be. They lose hope that they will ever be anything else in the eyes of society – so why not commit more crimes?

And who can blame them? People who get out of prison cannot vote if they have a felony record (depending on the state), they are often restricted in where they can live, they have restricted access to jobs, and are released often with debt and without resources or support structures. If they are being released, then that means they are not a 'threat' to society anymore (hypothetically

anyway). So then why do we make it impossible for them to live a restored and normal life! It's crazy – and completely un-Christlike – when you think about it (and not practical or purposeful). Restorative justice, and the teachings of Jesus, require more from us. Someone can be held accountable for their actions, while still being given the opportunity to grow beyond their action or mistake and to seek repentance and restoration.

And beyond Christian ethics, there is research behind this truth. “Labeling theory” is a real area of studying and research in the world of psychology and sociology. “Labeling theory indicates that society's assigning of labels to individuals or certain groups has an effect on their behavior.”⁵

Ask any child or teen who is starting school this week; they probably already know whether they have been labeled “popular” or “unpopular,” “nerd” or “jock,” “bully” or “bullied,” “teacher’s pet” or “troublemaker,” “smart” or “stupid,” “fat” or “skinny,” “cute” or “ugly.” Often the

labels don’t come in those exact words, but the effect is the same. We reduce people to an attribute, and the way we view them and think of them places them in a box that is very hard to bust out of.

And if you do just a bit of self-reflecting, you’ll probably realize that the labels you put on yourself (even as adults) are the MOST hard to remove. “I’m overweight,” “I’m not good with people,” “I’m not good at technology,” “I’m not a leader,” “I’m not faithful or spiritual enough.”

“Label...lead to self-limiting beliefs...Labels hold us back and keep us small...the way we label ourselves can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you think you’re a loser, you won’t try for goals you want to achieve, further “proving” that you are a loser. [Labels] limit your potential.”⁶

“Holding on to positive identity labels can also be problematic. Let’s say someone [is told repeatedly they are ‘smart’ or ‘successful,’ but then they struggle with a challenge or do

⁵ Caroline Ntara, “Labeling Theory Overview,” *Study.com* (Nov. 29, 2021), accessed on August 19, 2023 at <https://study.com/learn/lesson/labeling-theory.html>.

⁶ Leigh Aguirre, “The Harmful Effects of Labeling People (Ourselves and Others), Plus Finding Hope for

the Future,” *LinkedIn* (Dec. 2, 2020), accessed on August 19, 2023 at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/harmful-effects-labeling-people-ourselves-others-plus-leigh-aguirre>.

something foolish. That event can rock their self-confidence and make it difficult to admit that they've made a mistake. [And] – labeling people shapes your perspective of them. Shrugging off someone's accomplishment by calling them "talented" ignores the work they put in and the difficulties they overcame."⁷

The bottom line is that labels leave little room for the day-to-day ebb and flow of real human experience. UC Health Psychology Nurse and Social and Emotional Intelligence Behaviorist, Leigh Aguirre says, "By becoming aware of labels, you can start to loosen their hold on you. Then you can begin to challenge them and test them against reality. Question your labels by asking:

- Is this label currently true?
- Was this label ever true?
- Who [gave me this label]? Me or someone else?
- Is this label serving me or harming me?
- Who would I be without this label?

Labels don't have to run your life or ruin your life. Labels put you in a box, but you can open that box and break free."⁸

Max Lucado writes about this freedom in his children's book, *You are Special*. In the world of Lucado's imagination, the little wooden people called Wemmicks scurry about their days doing what they always do: sticking gold stars on the pretty and talented Wemmicks or gray dots on those who make mistakes. But now the stickering is all the more important. The Festival is at hand. That means that the envied Most Stars Award and the dreaded Most Dots Award are about to be given out. And poor Punchinello is sure to be a shoo-in for the Most Dots. He's always doing things wrong in the eyes of others it seems.

One day, Punchinello meets a wooden girl who has no stickers! When people try to put stars on her, they don't stick! And the dots don't stick either! She explains to Punchinello that this is because she goes to visit Eli, the master woodcarver, who made them all. She suggested Punchinello to go visit Eli as well. So Punchinello decided to go see Eli.

"Punchinello! How good to see you. Come and let me have a look at you."

⁷ Aguirre, *ibid*.

⁸ Aguirre, *ibid*.

Punchinello turned slowly and looked at the large bearded craftsman. *"You know my name?"* he asked.

"Off course I do. I made you."
Eli stooped down and picked him up and set him on the bench. *"Hmm"* the maker spoke thoughtfully as he looked at the dots. *"Looks like you've been given some bad marks."*

"I didn't mean to, Eli. I really tried hard."

"Oh, you don't have to defend yourself to me, child. I don't care what the other Wemmicks think."

"You don't?"

"No, and you shouldn't either. Who are they to give stars or dots? They're Wemmicks just like you. What they think doesn't matter, Punchinello. All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special."

"Me, special? Why? I can't walk fast. I can't jump. My paint is peeling. Why do I matter to you?"

Eli looked at Punchinello put his hands on those small wooden shoulders, and spoke very slowly. *"Because you're mine. That's why you matter to me."*

Punchinello had never had anyone look at him like this—much less his maker. He didn't know what to say.

"Every day I've been hoping you'd come." Eli explained.

"I came because I met someone who had no marks," said Punchinello.

"I know. She told me about you."

"Why don't the stickers stay on her?"

The maker spoke softly:
"Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what they think. The stickers only stick if you let them."

"What?!?"

"The stickers only stick if they matter to you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about their stickers."⁹

⁹ Max Lucado, *You are Special* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishing, 1997).

I think it's long past time that we ask why we've put such a lasting grey dot on Judas, and in turn, on ourselves and others. Why is Judas remembered as "the betrayer" instead of first as "a disciple" or a "beloved child of God"?

Judas' sin of betrayal was not unforgiveable. Nothing we do is unforgiveable. In fact, it's in the moment when Judas' betrayal is revealed to be known by Jesus – that the good news is shared and celebrated. Did you catch that? In Matthew 26, just after Judas says, "Surely, it is not I rabbi?" the text says, "*While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,'*" (Matthew 26:26-28).

Our sins are forgiven. Forever and always. Nothing can change that. We cannot earn our way into deeper love with God by doing "good things." We cannot lose the love we have from God by doing "bad things." We are loved, plain and simple. Yes, our actions have consequences

and we must be held accountable for them. But accountability does not mean an eternal attribution of our sin or misstep or mistake. It means admitting guilt, working to repair what was broken / lost / stolen / harmed, and restoring trust and relationship with those affected.

Judas' story invites us all to move beyond the labels we give ourselves and others. And the first step is just to start recognizing in our own language when we are using labels or generalizations on ourselves or others – or when we are centering someone's behavior or circumstances instead of their personhood.

And if we do catch ourselves using a label, how do we move beyond it?

Well, the same way Punchinello got his stickers to stop sticking to him. We focus on Jesus' grace and forgiveness. We focus on the love of our Creator for us and use that as inspiration for how we respond to the harmful actions we do to one another.

Judas asked for forgiveness and he repented. I wonder – what would have happened if the world had remembered Judas

also as “the one who repented” or “the one who was sorry for his actions” or “the one who returned the silver he stole?”

Judas’ life might not have been different if he was remembered differently. But our lives certainly would be. Because instead of seeing an example of a disciple who sinned and was “sworn off forever as bad and unforgiveable,” we would have seen a powerful example of forgiveness in Scripture where the one who did harm asked for forgiveness from others who did harm...and that forgiveness actually changed their actions and future. Instead, of a Field of Blood – memorializing death and tragedy – we might have a Field of Dreams – celebrating the changed hearts and minds of the chief priests and elders.

Judas’ story reminds us of how easy and tempting it is to demonize others for their behavior rather than centering their belovedness. God’s love matters more than any label.

So for all of us today who are still haunted by something we have done...for all of us today who are still holding a label over someone for something they have done to us...for all of us today who label whole

categories of people in the world (the terrorists, the homeless, the democrats, the republicans, the rich, the poor) because it’s easier to “other them” than to “be in relationship or seek to understand them”...may God forgive us.

And may we all know that our behavior does not earn us belonging in the embrace of God’s love. Yet, the amazing thing is...knowing our belovedness certainly affects and changes our behavior.

May we honor Judas Iscariot today by remembering him as a disciple and follower of Jesus who was human and made a mistake and who also modeled Jesus’ teachings by repenting. May we never again reduce him to his action of betrayal, but rather remember him for his belovedness. And may we do the same for one another too.

For if we are to *See Ourselves in the Twelve*, we are to See Ourselves as our Lord sees us too – Faithful AND Flawed AND always and forever Forgiven.

Amen.