

March 3, 2021 – 2 Samuel 15:12, 17:1-4; Acts 3:14-19; John 18:1-11

Think of a time when you felt betrayed. I don't have to ask you to imagine a fictional circumstance, I expect. The feeling of betrayal is a universal human experience.

Maybe it was a big betrayal. Someone stole money from you. Someone physically hurt you. Someone irreparably damaged your reputation.

Or maybe it was a smaller betrayal. Someone reneged on a promise. Someone repeated something said in confidence. Someone said something unkind about you behind your back. There were no severe repercussions. But it still hurt.

Betrayal happens a lot. An entire industry of tabloids and celebrity gossip has developed around reporting how famous people have betrayed each other. A form of media that Americans consume obsessively. Maybe because it's such a relatable emotion.

Betrayal also occurs throughout God's Word. And we see several instances of it in our scripture lessons for today. And, as we consider them, I'd like to start with our Old Testament Lesson. Because, frankly, it's the most obscure and needs the most backstory. But it is a tragic tale.

It all begins with three children of King David: Tamar, Absalom, and Amnon. Tamar and Absalom are full brother and sister, while Amnon is their half-brother. David's son by a different wife. And Amnon is... well... not right in the head. And he becomes infatuated with his half-sister Tamar. Such that eventually he attacks her and rapes her.

The news of this gets out, but David does nothing to punish Amnon. And so, after two years of rage and bitterness, Absalom decides to take matters into his own hands. He murders Amnon in revenge for what he did to his sister.

David is furious about this and banishes Absalom from Jerusalem. Only after years away from home does David finally relent and allow Absalom to return. But even then their relationship is icy.

Because, as it turns out, the feeling is mutual. Absalom absolutely hates his father for not giving his sister the justice she deserved. And he is convinced that he can be a far better king than David. So he plots to seize the throne by force.

Which is where we end up in our lesson for today. With Absalom gathering supporters and planning his next move. And among those supporters is a man named Ahithophel. Ahithophel was one of King David's closest friends and advisors. A man he trusted implicitly.

And yet, here he is, one of the first to jump ship and join Absalom's coup d'etat. Here he is, plotting with Absalom to gather 12,000 soldiers to attack David and assassinate him. It is a stark and stunning betrayal.

One that wounds David deeply. As he's on the run from Absalom, David writes a number of Psalms about the situation. Describing his fear and anger and loneliness. Praying for God's deliverance and God's vengeance. Praising the God who he knows is still with him, even in his darkest hour.

But one subject that David goes back to time and time again in these psalms is the horrible feeling of being betrayed by his friends. You might think he'd dwell on the betrayal of his son, Absalom. But no, David understands why Absalom is doing what he's doing. This situation was a long time coming.

It's the betrayal of close friends like Ahithophel that really gets to him. He writes in Psalm 41, *"Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me."* How can someone who sat next to you in your own home, who ate dinner at your dining table, be so hurtful? How can they be your best friend one day and, the next, kick you when you're down?

It's a question we often ask about Judas Iscariot, as well. Here's another man who pretended to be a close friend. Another man who was a trusted servant and disciple. Another man who literally sat at the Last Supper and ate the bread that Jesus broke and gave to him. The very bread that Jesus declared to be his body, given for the forgiveness of their sins. How could Judas betray his Lord like that?

Well, in both cases, the answer is pretty simple: selfishness. For Ahithophel, it was a very practical political maneuver. He believed that Absalom would defeat David. And he wanted to get in on the ground floor in the new regime. He thought if he sided with Absalom, it would make him the new king's right hand man. One of the most powerful people in the kingdom. And that was worth more to him than friendship or loyalty.

Judas' motives were fairly similar. Judas was greedy. John's Gospel records that he served as the treasurer of sorts for the apostles', but was a thief who embezzled from the money bag and stole funds that were to go to the poor.

But even more than that, Judas simply didn't believe in Jesus. He did not believe that Jesus was who he said he was. And, with that as his foundation, he had every reason to profit from the situation. Profit by stealing from the money bag. And profit by betraying Jesus to the Jewish authorities.

Like Ahithophel, he saw which way the wind was blowing. He knew Jesus would be arrested. He knew there was a confrontation coming between Jesus and the Sanhedrin. And he chose what he believed would be the winning side.

So by betraying Jesus, he accomplished two goals: he made himself 30 pieces of silver richer and he gained status with the most powerful men in Jerusalem. It was opportunity he couldn't pass up. And all it cost was Jesus' life.

You see, that's what betrayal always comes down to: doing what's best for you at the expense of someone that you call a friend. And it comes to us very, very naturally. Because we're always interested in doing what's best for ourselves. There's a reason why Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Because, out of all the people on the earth, we love ourselves most of all.

Which is an even bigger problem than we might realize. Because this utter selfishness and love for ourselves isn't just a betrayal of our friends. It's a betrayal of our Lord.

Peter tells the crowds in Acts chapter 3, "You denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life..." Now, tell me, do you really think that every person he was speaking to in that crowd was there before Pilate, asking for Barabbas to be freed? Do you think every person that Peter was speaking to was among those who cried out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

No. This passage in Acts 3 takes place at least 50 days after the events of Good Friday. Probably more like 60 or 70 days. Two months have gone by. Maybe there were a handful of people there who saw the crucifixion. But not nearly everyone.

Yet, still, Peter says to the whole crowd, everyone who can hear him, "You killed him. You thought only of yourselves. You did what was best for you. You betrayed your Lord."

Why? Because it's true for any person who thinks only of themselves. Any act of selfishness is an act of betrayal against Jesus. Any time we love something other than the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we have betrayed Jesus. Any time we love ourselves more than our neighbor, we have betrayed Jesus.

When Jesus looked up in the garden and saw his betrayer coming for him, it could have been any one of us that he saw. And yet, he went to the cross anyway. Everything about John's account spells that out. He went to a place where he knew he could be found. He knew exactly what was going to happen. He identified himself to the soldiers who arrived. He willingly, peacefully drank the cup the Father had given to him.

Why? To blot out our sins. That's what Peter says. After these incredibly harsh words to the people of Jerusalem, he doesn't say, "You betrayed him, so go hang yourself like Judas did. Go hang yourself like Ahithophel did also. (Yes, he too committed suicide after his betrayal). You betrayed him and you'll never be forgiven, so just give up and kill yourself."

No. What does Peter say? You betrayed him... "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out." Repent. Turn again. Return to the Lord. And find forgiveness.

We are all betrayers. We betray our friends. We betray our Lord. But we are not all Judas and Ahithophel, seeking our own gain and then sinking into despair.

And the difference is repentance. The difference is knowing that we can always return to the Lord who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We know that while we were yet sinners, seeking only our own gain, Christ died for us. He drank that cup of suffering to blot out our sins. Even the sin of betraying him.

By faith in his name, we are made well. By faith in his name, we are raised from the dead. By faith in his name we are given perfect health. Day after day, by our sin, we kill the Author of life. Day after day, by his death and resurrection, the Author of life gives us new life.

Repent. Turn again. Your sins are blotted out. For no matter your betrayal, he will always be your friend. Amen.