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From the Gospel of Judas, translated by Mark Mattison, edited for readability by Pastor Buzz

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, this baptism which they've received in my name will destroy the whole generation of the earthly Adam. Tomorrow they'll torture the one who bears me. Truly I say to you, no hand of a mortal human will fall upon me. You'll do more than all of them, because you'll sacrifice the human who bears me. Your horn has already been raised, your anger has been kindled, your star has ascended, and your heart has grown strong. Truly I say to you, the thrones of the realm have been defeated, the kings have grown weak, the angelic generations have grieved, and the evil they sowed is destroyed, and the ruler is wiped out. And then the fruit of the great generation of Adam will be exalted, because before heaven, earth, and the angels, that generation from the realms exists. Look, you've been told everything. Lift up your eyes and see the cloud with the light in it and the stars around it. And the star that leads the way is your star."

Then Judas looked up and saw the luminous cloud, and he entered it. And Judas didn't see Jesus anymore.

Immediately there was a disturbance among the Jews. Their high priests grumbled because he'd gone into the guest room to pray. But some scribes were there watching closely so they could arrest him during his prayer, because they were afraid of the people, since they all regarded him as a prophet.

And they approached Judas and said to him, "What are you doing here? Aren't you Jesus' disciple?" Then he answered them as they wished. Then Judas received some money and handed him over to them.

Matthew 5:43-44, English Standard Version.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Mark 10:17-18, English Standard Version.

¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

The new Judas.

A document called the Gospel of Judas was re-discovered in Egypt in the 1970s. It was probably written around the year 130 A.D. About 85% of the original has been reconstructed from numerous fragments. Even though it was lost for quite some time, it was well-known in the ancient world, and copies of it were read by early Christians. It was condemned by the early Catholic Church, in large part because it was considered Gnostic. Since the Gospel of Judas was condemned so strongly, it has been totally disregarded by Christianity over the last two millennia. Essentially, Gnostic Christianity was an early Christian spin-off that was very mystical in nature. The Gnostic faith has very ancient, pagan, pre-Judeo-Christian roots; these folks said that the material world of the earth was created by an inferior God. Gnostic Christians believed that humans are wholly evil, and that the earthly world is inherently a place of suffering. Some even believed that humans should not have children, so that our evilness cannot be passed on. Many Gnostics claimed to have secret, powerful knowledge about God and Jesus. The truth is that branding the

Gospel of Judas as totally Gnostic was a little unfair, but it definitely runs counter to what we are taught in the four Gospels that we accept as being trustworthy, and it is essentially Gnostic. One question is whether the Gospel of Judas is authentic at all. Is there anything in the Gospel of Judas that represents true teachings of Jesus – or is it wholly fictional? More importantly, is there anything we can learn from it, despite the fact that it is not scriptural, not canonical?

Let's look at our first quote, which again, is not canonical, not part of the legitimate Bible. First of all, keep in mind that the Gospel of Judas was written only decades after the four scriptural Gospels were written. It is considered to be an authentic document in that it was used by some early Christians as the story of Judas and his relationship to Jesus. The Gospel of Judas is short and consists mostly of dialogue between Jesus and other people, in particular, between Jesus and Judas. In our passage, Jesus is telling Judas that *"you'll sacrifice the human who bears me."* What this means is that Judas won't be sending Jesus, the Son of God, to be killed. Remember that this is a somewhat Gnostic text and it does take the stand that the human state is inferior and ungodly. So, Jesus is telling Judas that all he, Judas, is going to do is kill the thin, hollow, decrepit human shell of Jesus, not the true spiritual Jesus. Judas is, in a sense, setting Jesus free. Judas is doing a good thing. Jesus goes on to compliment Judas, saying: *"Your horn has already been*

raised, your star has ascended, and your heart has grown strong. Truly I say to you, Lift up your eyes and see the cloud with the light in it and the stars around it. And the star that leads the way is your star.”

We see that in the Gnostic Gospel of Judas, which by the way, was never believed to have been written by Judas, promotes Judas as a hero. In the Gospel, Judas is a confidant of Jesus, while the other twelve Apostles (including the thirteenth, Matthias, presumably, the one who replaced Judas) are bumbling fools, angry people who are jealous of Judas for his special role. Judas has the glory of handing over the mortal Jesus to the authorities for destruction, while the spiritual Jesus will then be free to return to the eternal, divine light above. Rather than being vilified as the traitor who turns over Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, as he is portrayed in the four scriptural Gospels, Judas is seemingly the only one among those on earth who actually understands Jesus and who he is. Jesus tells Judas revelations about God, the creation of the universe, and eternity that Jesus passes on to no one else. Judas is thus the most holy of all the Apostles. But it's understood that temporarily, Judas will be trapped on earth, persecuted as a traitor, having done something that others are not able to understand. Judas will, like Jesus, sacrifice his human self, but in return, he will attain great, eternal light.

However, there are legitimate experts who claim that in an attempt to tell a good story, to create something that would get attention among academics, the translators and interpreters of the Gospel of Judas have misled us. These other scholars say that the Gospel of Judas does not portray Judas as a totally good guy. They say that the Gospel of Judas says that Judas will be condemned, not rewarded, for what he has done. They claim that very subtle translation errors are the reason for the overall gross misinterpretation of the Gospel of Judas. They argue that translators carefully manipulated the text of the Gospel of Judas to deliberately turn Judas into a hero. The claim is that it was done in part to counter the notion that the other Gospels are anti-Semitic. The bottom line, they say, is that the Gospel of Judas does not portray Judas differently than the four canonical Gospels.

So, what does this mean for us? From my perspective, there is something about the Gospel of Judas that makes sense. You can't kill God. We all have an intuitive sense that when Jesus was crucified, although he of course suffered horribly, there was something about his death that was not as tragic as it would be if he weren't God. When Judas betrayed Jesus, Judas only had the capacity of killing the human nature of Jesus, not his existence as God, as a member of the Trinity. And we do have a sense that Judas was playing an important role, that Jesus had to be crucified, and that there had to be a Judas. Remember, that in the Gospel of

John Jesus says: *“the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’”* Jesus is quoting Psalm 41 here, saying that since the beginning of time, there was a prophesy that meant that Judas would betray him.

Let me focus on something else, though, that has been a central component of the modern discussion of the Gospel of Judas. It has to do with this issue of anti-Semitism. In centuries past, the story of Judas, and the brutal way that Jews are described in the Gospel of Matthew (as we saw last week), has led people to direct hatred toward Jews. The Jews, they say, killed Jesus, and Judas was the most evil Jew of them all – a traitor, an insider and follower of the Lord, who was so concerned with making a little money that he handed over the person he knew to be the one, true Messiah. Just this past April, in a town in Poland, people erected a huge, straw-filled effigy of Judas, complete with Orthodox Jewish sidelocks and a giant nose. They then had children beat this Jewish effigy to shreds with sticks. And the burning of Judas effigies has remained a solid tradition in Greece, parts of South America, and the Middle East. Medieval anti-Semitism is alive and well in many parts of the world, clearly. Perhaps more to the point, we owe the very roots of our faith to the Israelites who then became the Jews, so why see the as evil?

We do want to be careful that we never use our faith as an excuse to hate others. Remember our second quote, from Matthew, where Jesus says: ⁴³ *“You*

have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And remember that Jesus himself was very modest about concluding that he was somehow better than others. For Jesus is quoted in our third passage, which is from Mark, as saying: *¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."*

So, be modest. Don't hold others below you because they do not share your beliefs, even if they should declare that there is no God. We don't convince anyone with anger or judgement. We convince them with love and by showing how to live like Jesus Christ. One thing we would like to do is grow this church. There's going to be a reunion service where people who used to attend this church, along with some others, will be invited to come. There are new housing developments going up around here, and in the next handful of years, Fort Collins is going to continue to move east. The way we can draw people to our faith and to this particular faith family is by reaching out in love. We should embrace everyone in the community.

The Gospel of Judas, simply as a piece of literature, teaches us something. And this is that there is an alternative way to look at anyone who might be

considered evil. But we can learn this lesson from the canonical Gospels themselves. Listen to this from the Gospel of John. ²¹*After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."* ²²*The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.* ²³*One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side,* ²⁴*so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.* ²⁵*So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?"* ²⁶*Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.* ²⁷*Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly."* ²⁸*Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.* ²⁹*Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor.* ³⁰*So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.*

Jesus predicts that Judas will betray him, saying that he will signal this by passing some food to his betrayer. After Judas has taken it, the text says that "Satan entered him". Remember that being invaded by evil spirits or by Satan in biblical times is often thought today to be a statement that someone was actually mentally ill. Does the Bible say that Judas is neither traitor nor hero, that he has been taken

over by Satan or that he is mentally ill? Should we ever have blamed Judas at all? After all, it was illogical to turn against the Son of God for a little money.

There's been some controversy recently in the news, as to whether someone who shot and killed a number of people, and used a combat weapon to do so, was simply filled with hate or if he was also mentally ill. The news media was very quick to condemn him as definitely NOT mentally ill and motivated only by racism. Society likes to target someone as inherently evil, with no excuse for violent behavior. Since I have never talked to this person, I certainly don't feel I can make this judgement about this particular individual. I do know that society has a right to defend itself, to protect itself – but at least those of us who are Christians should put our trust in God, not in the ability of newscasters to make judgements about mental health. As a chaplain, I have spoken to a number of psychotic people who have had extremely hateful and violent things to say.

Think about Judas the next time you find yourself wanting to hate someone for doing something horrible. There is indeed evil in the world, but there is also mental illness. Protect innocent people; Jesus taught us to do this. But treat all people with mercy. And always, always leave the judgement of their eternal soul to God. The Gospel of Judas, along with our four Gospels, teach us this.