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Date: Maundy Thursday - March 28, 2013
Sermon Title: Forgiving Ourselves
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"Is it I, Lord?" What was the darkest hour of Holy Week? There are some obvious contenders. Probably everybody would put Judas at the top. He was one of Jesus's closest friends, one of his 12 hand-picked disciples, and he sells Jesus out for 30 lousy pieces of silver. For whatever reasons, he betrayed Jesus, he gave up on Jesus, he turned him over to the authorities in the dark of night, the original "Judas goat."

The crucifixion itself was darkness itself: evil from beginning to end, a complete mockery of justice, a thorough abuse of religion, a collusion of selfish power-mongers, resulting in the execution of an innocent man. Remember, Pontius Pilate actually said, "He's innocent," and then sentenced Jesus to death.

And Peter is an obvious choice for the biggest disappointment. Peter was clearly one of Jesus's favorites! He was bold, brash, destined for great things, willing to defend Jesus to the death. Except ... except ... except ... after Jesus was arrested, a girl asked Peter if he knew Jesus. A servant girl. Not a soldier, with a big sword! A girl. And Peter denied it, three times, denied even knowing Jesus. That was a low point.

But there's one more dark moment that is often overlooked. On Maundy Thursday at his Last Supper, Jesus announced, plain as day, "One of you is going to betray me." *One of you is going to betray me.* That's big stuff. And sad; very, very sad.

Here are 13 men, they'd been living and working together for three years, they'd given up everything for some greater purpose; they'd been through good times and bad. They really were a "Band of Brothers." And suddenly, Jesus announces that one of them is a traitor.

Now, here's what you expect might happen. You might expect they'd start guessing who it was, maybe even accusing one another, saying things like, "I never trusted so-and-so, he has shifty eyes; that one over there was always a slacker, he never really seemed into it; and that other one, he and

his brother, they just were in it for themselves." One by one, each one would point fingers at somebody else. That's what we expect would happen.

Instead, surprisingly, maybe even sheepishly, each one starts to question himself! In the old King James Version of the Bible, each one asks, "Is it I, Lord? Is it I?" Some versions are a little more cynical, a little more hypocritical. They say, "Surely, not I, Lord!" Which makes us think of Shakespeare, who has Hamlet's mother saying, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

I remember in my Psychology 101 class being taught that sometimes the loudest protesters and attackers are often the most guilty of whatever they're attacking. Similarly, these loudly protesting disciples with their "Surely not I, Lord!" are really echoing the older version, "Is it I, Lord?" Because, down deep, in all honesty, they knew their own guilt.

Our theme this Lent has been "forgiveness." It was actually suggested by our Adult Education Committee, and so the theme has run through all of Lent. When we came to Holy Week, it's unavoidable.

So many people do so much wrong, they all need forgiveness! They get it wrong. They misunderstand. They mess up overtly, covertly, publicly, privately, ignorantly, purposefully, selfishly, blindly.

On Palm Sunday, it's the crowd that got it wrong. On that gloriously happy start to Holy Week, they cheered Jesus for the wrong reason. They wanted a conquering hero, a King David, a George Washington. Five days later, they kept their silence and their distance.

During Holy Week, religion got it wrong. Jesus spent Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in Jerusalem, in the Temple, confronting, challenging, teaching, correcting. He was not happy with what religion had become: bloody ritual, hard rules, mindless worship, all wrapped up in commercialism.

And on Maundy Thursday, the disciples got it wrong. Jesus spent an emotion-packed, symbolically powerful evening with his best friends — and they proved themselves woefully ignorant, willfully ignorant, of everything Jesus stood for. The best way to summarize their behavior is they were utterly selfish. Bragging, sleeping, posing, whatever they did, however we choose to explain it or excuse it, they didn't get it. On the basis of their Holy Week behavior, I think we can say the disciples did not understand a single thing Jesus said or did in their three years together.

And it shows in their heart-wrenching confession to Jesus, "Is it I, Lord?" Because down deep each one knew he had already betrayed Jesus. In their hearts, in their minds, in their spirits, in their faith, they had all thought of turning on Jesus.

Maybe not murder, exactly. Maybe not for 30 pieces of silver, maybe not collaborating with Jesus's opponents, but mentally and spiritually they were already out of there. One by one they had already stepped out on Jesus. Perhaps they had come to doubt Jesus. They couldn't see an end game or a purpose. Perhaps they were disappointed; they joined up to change the world, not end up on a cross. Perhaps they were afraid. Perhaps they were planning to return home, get their old jobs back, restart their families, live a normal life.

For those of us who have ever left a job, transferred colleges or moved away, you know you've already left before you walk out the door. The disciples had already left Jesus. "One of you will betray me," Jesus said. And each of the disciples asked, "Is it I, Lord?" It was their way of saying, "You got me. How'd you know it was I?" I give them credit for honesty, seriously. They actually liked Jesus, they loved him, but they knew it was tough to follow him, faithfully, every day.

I'm not going to speak for you, the congregation. I'm just going to speak for myself, David Rowe, individual Christian. Every hour of every day I do something, say something, think something that doesn't measure up to Jesus's standards. Fortunately, I sleep seven hours a day, so it's only 17 hours a day when I actively fail Jesus. I'm just like the disciples. I know what's expected of me. I know what I want to be like, and I know what I am. I know what I settle for.

So I actually applaud the disciples for making it personal. "Is it I, Lord? Surely not I, Lord! Me? You think I would fail you, deny you, abandon you, forget you, overlook you, disappoint you? Me?" And all the while, quietly in their own hearts, they know their own weaknesses in faith. Just as we do.

Unfortunately, Christianity is a very personal religion. Oh, we take great interest in society and community. We seek justice and righteousness and mercy across the board. We want to save the world, one person at a time.

I had a seminary professor who hated the beautiful hymn, "In the Garden." He said it was too individualistic, too personal, when we sing, "I come to the garden alone ... and he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own." But for me, that's not only the beauty of the hymn but also the beauty of our faith. It is personal. When we sing, "What a friend we

have in Jesus," that's personal. When we sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me," that's personal. When we sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know," that's personal. And, from time to time when we take stock of ourselves, and we are humbled to have to ask, "Is it I, Lord?" that's personal. Sin is personal. Forgiveness is personal. Death is personal. Resurrection is personal. Love is personal. And all that together is what makes the cross personal.

In the pew next to you is a copy of my poetry book. We put it out during Lent as a little devotional for you to use when you come to church, or take home, if you'd like. There are 15 or 16 poems in there directly related to Lent, including one section titled, "Lenten Poems," and none is more obvious than "The Cross."

I first read it aloud maybe 10 years ago at a Jewish synagogue. I didn't know if I should. The cross has a horrible history for Jewish people. Ignorant people have used the crucifixion as a bad excuse for centuries of anti-Semitism and have turned the cross into a symbol of hatred. But in the poem, I strip all that away. I make it personal. No religion, no denomination, no creed. Just me. I answer the question, "Is it I, Lord?" putting me squarely in the upper room with Jesus, with a mirror. And I look into that mirror and see myself. I don't point fingers at anyone else.

That night, at the synagogue, several Jewish people came up to me and said, "That's the first time I ever understood the cross for Christians. Thank you." They were used to seeing it as a symbol, a symbol of group hatred toward them from others, a symbol of group blame on them. There was an ugliness to it, a meanness, a vengeance. At last they were able to appreciate why we see it as a thing of beauty. We place it on our altars. We wear it around our necks; we put it on our flags and our gravestones and high up on our steeples. It's personal, and we need it.

So I'm going to ask you to join me. Turn to page 45 and make it personal. You and I. let's read it aloud, together, remembering Jesus's answer to the disciples' question, "Is it I, Lord?" His answer is to go to the cross.

The Cross

The Cross.
The loss.
The cost.
The gain for me
the win

sin-free,
somehow.

The miracle
the victory
the irony
all done for me
amazing grace,
somehow.

The life
the death
the love
the gift for me
too good to be
true.
Somehow.

Yet, the blood
 the hurt
 the cause
 too close for me
 too hard to see
 somehow.

Yes, the tree
the curséd wood
shaped to a "T"
pounded by nails, by me,
twisted by pain's travail,
no pain, no gain for me
how quickly I see
the "T" becomes an "I."

I, the cause and effect,
I, the good thief and the bad,
I the Pilate, I the priest.
I the leper, I the least,
I, St. Peter, I, St. John.
I was there, I was gone
I, the mother
I, the crowd,
one hoping for salvation
one cursing out loud.

I, the centurion,
believing at last
I, me, looking at the tree,
bended knee,
aghast.