

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 2, 2020

“Judas Iscariot’s ‘Imperishable Realm’”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

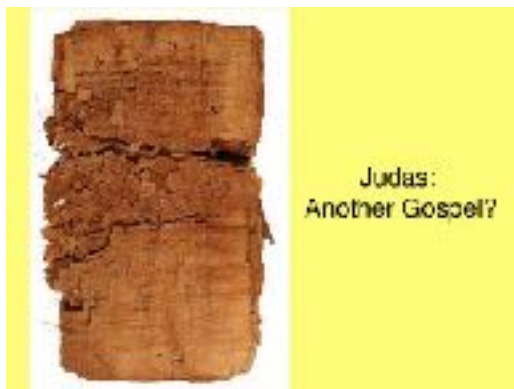
Christian Scripture: John 13:1-20



Later in this service, we will celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion together with our beloved former minister, Fred Edmonds. We are blessed today to have him lead in our midst. Often when we celebrate Holy Communion, we recite the words “We remember that on the night of betrayal and desertion...”¹ Yet, *remembering* is tricky for events that happened last month, let alone for events that occurred a hundred years ago! When we have a Council meeting we often remember conversations and decisions similarly. On rare occasions, we remember contradictory versions of conversations and decisions. Yet I think it is fair to say that, most often, we remember discussions

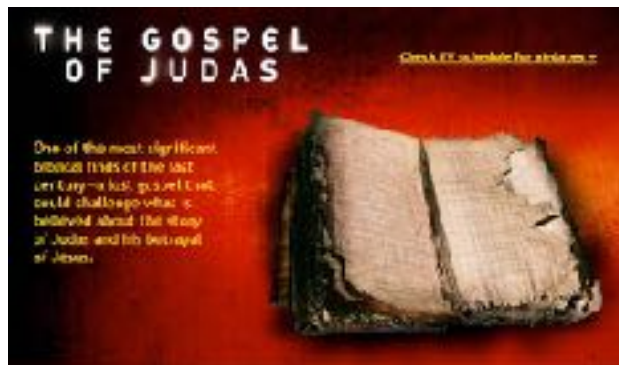
¹ United Church of Christ, *Book of Worship*, Office for Church Life and Leadership, New York, 1986, p. 85.

and decisions *differently*, not necessarily in complete agreement, but not in complete opposition either. This is because when we remember the same event, we *interpret* what we saw and heard differently. Such is the case with the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All four *remembered* (most likely second or third hand) the night of Jesus' betrayal and desertion *differently*, not because they heard or saw inaccurately, but because they interpreted the same events *differently*.

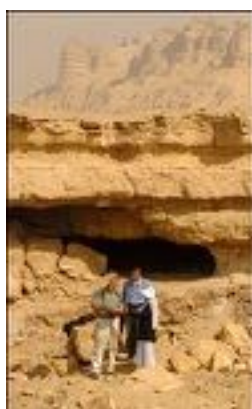


Yet, what if I told you that there were other texts, other gospels, which interpreted Jesus' betrayal and desertion *differently* than did those who authored Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? What if I told you there were books written from the perspectives of Mary Magdalene and other disciples: Peter, Philip, Thomas, and James? What if I told you that during the first centuries of the early Christian church, dozens of books were written, read, copied, believed, and studied - in addition to the four found in our Bible? For the next five weeks, we will introduce ourselves to some of these extra-canonical

gospels, that is, gospels not accepted by church authorities and thus not included in our Bible.



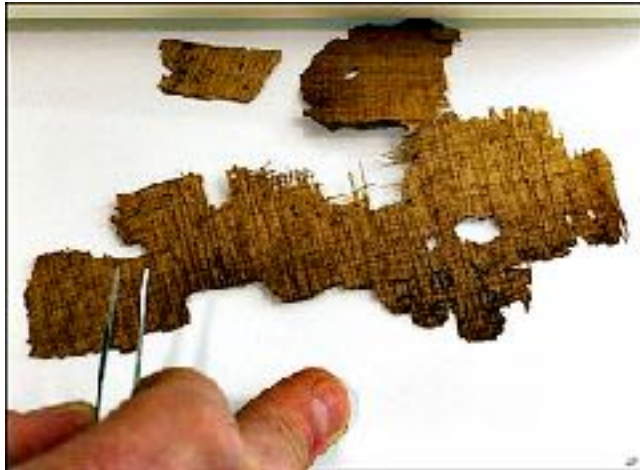
We will explore these other gospels, beginning with the Gospel of Judas, not to contradict the gospels that we know and love (though even they differ from one another). No, we will introduce ourselves to the *other* gospels so that we can benefit from the full diversity of perspectives that existed during the first centuries of the Christian church. Out of this diversity, I pray we may will better understand the teachings of the four gospels with which we are already so familiar and thus learn lessons that strengthen and enrich our faith.



Sometime during the 1970s, a copy of the Gospel of Judas, translated into Coptic during the third century (carbon dated to 280 CE) from its original

second century (150 CE) Greek was discovered in an Egyptian catacomb cave.²

The gospel was not written by Judas, but rather by another author about one hundred years after Judas lived. The copier wrote on papyrus.



After 1,600 years, the paper was so fragile that it practically disintegrated upon contact. The only known copy of Judas' gospel travelled around Egypt, Europe, and eventually to the United States and suffered terrible damage.³ At one time it was frozen. At another time in Hicksville, New York, someone stuffed it in a humid safety deposit box for seventeen years!



² We know the Gospel of Judas is much older than 280 CE because Christian clerics wrote against it as early as 180 CE.

³ Elaine Pagels and Karen King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007).

In 2001, the gospel came to light. For five years, it was painstakingly reconstituted and deciphered. In 2016, the Gospel of Judas was revealed to the world and regarded, after the Dead Sea Scrolls (1945), as one of the most significant archaeological finds of the twenty-first century (National Geographic Society).⁴

But what did Judas' gospel say? Even more riveting than the gospel's journey to discovery and publication was the bombshell revelation that, from the author's perspective, Judas did not betray Jesus as the canonical gospels writers narrated. Rather, the Gospel of Judas remembered Jesus' betrayal and desertion from Judas' perspective and understood Judas to be Jesus' most trusted, faithful, and only true disciple to which Jesus revealed his 'secret' (gnostic/hidden) teachings.

As strange as it may seem, this notion that Judas was Jesus' most faithful disciple is not inconceivable. In John's gospel that Michael Marion this morning read so beautifully, Jesus was portrayed to be in perfect control of the entire situation and thus his fate. Jesus (with his 'father' in heaven) was the composer, conductor, and player of the entire passion story! In John's gospel, Jesus was aware of everything! Don't you think it strange that according to John's gospel, Jesus mentioned many times that someone would betray him and indicated that he knew exactly who it was and did NOTHING to frustrate or

⁴ Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic and Krosney Productions, 2006).

avoid the course of events?! In verse 28, Jesus told Judas “do quickly what you have to do”. Judas’ gospel argues that Judas, the most trusted disciple, complied with Jesus’ request of him to turn him over to the authorities, thus incurring the wrath of the world, so that the scriptures would be fulfilled and thus God’s will accomplished.



I would like to conclude our exposure to Judas’ gospel with a more devotional focus. Recall the author of Judas’ gospel wrote it in the mid-second century. This was a time of terrific persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. In the second century, Romans authorities tortured, slaughtered, and tore apart with animals Christians in public spectacles for their failure to renounce their faith and respect the gods of the empire. At the time, many church authorities argued that Christians should welcome and even invite martyrdom at the hands of their persecutors. Furthermore, clerics promised that the physical bodies of those killed would be resurrected. The author of Judas’ gospel was horrified that the church would view the agonizing death of innocent Christians to be desired or needed (for sacrifice) by God. Therefore, Judas’ gospel downplayed the importance of the material, the corporal, the

physical, and the bodily resurrection of believers. Judas understood that that which is spiritual is imperishable and that which is material is perishable and thus of lesser importance.

What we can learn from Judas' gospel is also that which we learn from John's gospel. In our reading today, Jesus taught his disciples to love others, symbolized by the washing of the feet. 'Loving service' is a spiritual tenant that is primary and thus imperishable. That which is material is of much lesser importance. For example, my Tesla, my home and property (that I hope to someday purchase), and my pension fund (to which this church faithfully contributes) are all corruptible material. Anything material and thus related to my senses ought *not* be my life's concern. Judas' gospel teaches us that unlike the material realm, the spiritual realm is incorruptible. That which belongs to the imperishable realm shall live eternally while the material realm is corruptible and ought not be one's ultimate concern.



This week we mark the passing of Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis. John Lewis, rather than estimating his worth by financial or material accumulation, sought to foster the spiritual realm by fighting for

equality, justice, and peace. John sought the imperishable realm, the spiritual enhancement of his brothers and sisters, his enemies, and his country.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".