

Love Is the Way

John 14:18-24

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For the last several weeks now, we have spent our time examining the lives, the personalities, and lessons of the first to follow Jesus. Scripture provides ample material for some of those personalities; but for others, not so much...

Today is a "not-so-much" day.

When we come to the apostle most commonly known as Thaddeus, we have to begin by acknowledging that his life is largely a great mystery to us. In fact, his *name* is a great mystery to us.

St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, actually called him "Trinomius," which means, "a man with three names."

That's because in the gospel of Mark, this apostle is called *Thaddeus* (Mark 3:18). But in some ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew, he is referred to as *Lebbaeus* (Matthew 10:3). And in the list of apostles in both Luke and Acts, he is called *Judas son of James* (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13).

The Gospel of John has no list of Jesus' first disciples, but here in our passage today, one of the disciples identified as "Judas (not Iscariot)," asks, "Lord, how is that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" (John 14:22).

Thaddeus. Lebbaeus. Judas, son of James. Judas (not Iscariot). Trinomius. Which one is he? Or is he just one?

Like today, it wasn't that uncommon for one person to have several names, so it is possible that this one man's full name was Judas Lebbaeus Thaddeus, and that he was properly known by all three names.

Most of us have at least three names, if not more. My full name is Roy Daniel Schumacher, but none of you call me Roy. Not even my mom calls me Roy – unless I'm in trouble. Then she calls me by my full name. The IRS knows me as Roy, but growing up, I always went by some form of my middle name, Daniel.

When I was a toddler, I had a penchant for wanting to be unhindered by clothes, so usually I wandered around the house in just my diaper. This led my family to give me the nickname, "Dan, Dan, the diaper man." Once I grew out of diapers, I was "Danny" to my brothers and my friends. Then somewhere around sixth or seventh grade, I decided that Danny was a "little kid" name and I wanted a cool, teenage name, so I made the jump to "Dan." It's a very hip name, isn't it? Dan. Like a very cool CPA or a hip librarian.

In high school, my name changed again when my friends of their own volition stopped calling me Dan and started calling “Shoe,” short for *Schumacher*. And then, one day, I was called to ministry and began serving a church. Now I mostly answer to *Pastor Dan* – unless I’m at home. For some reason, no matter how many times I ask, Christen refuses to call me Pastor Dan.

You see, names change based on our context.

So it’s possible that Thaddeus had several names, and depending on which circle he was in or in what period of life he was in, his name changed to fit the context.

For instance, what if *you* were one of Jesus’ first twelve disciples and your name was Judas, but there was another guy in the group named Judas, too, and the other guy sold Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver and got him killed? Would *you* still want to go by Judas?

Remember, those days weren’t like today. There were no Instagram selfies or Facebook photos to look up of the guy. He didn’t even have a picture ID in his wallet. He was just known by word of mouth. “Judas, one of Jesus’ disciples” was probably just enough information to get him confused with the other Judas.

We sometimes have the same issues around our denominational name. Thanks to hate groups like Westboro Baptist Church, lots of Baptists have decided that it would benefit their church to simply remove “Baptist” from its name. Keep the theology and the practices, but lose the name.

Virginia Heights Baptist Church of Roanoke is now “The Heights Community Church.” First Baptist Church of Sunbury is now “The Bridge.” And, even when I’m out in public and introduce myself as pastor of First Baptist, I’m quick to add: “But don’t worry – we are Baptist, but we’re the reasonable kind.”

So, it could be that Judas (*not* Iscariot) decided to go by Thaddeus after the other Judas gave his name a bad reputation.

The truth is, nobody wants their name drug through the garbage. Nobody wants their name dishonored or used casually. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God talks about it like this: “You shall not take my name in vain” (Exodus 20:7). And that ought to give us pause and make us take into consideration how it is that we’re wearing the mantle of another name, the name “Christian.”

There is a sobering challenge in calling ourselves, Christian, because – as groups like Westboro Baptist have taught us – nothing can be so damaging to the spread of the gospel than for people to call themselves Christian, but then act in the most un-Christlike ways.

The famous preacher, George Buttrick, often said, “Some people live the life and don’t wear the badge, and other people wear the badge but don’t live the life.”

So it begs the questions: how are we wearing the badge of “Christian?”

I’d like to remind you that the inscription emblazoned on the belt buckle of the Nazi armed forces read “Gott mit uns” – “God with us.” And I suspect that many of those soldiers believed that God was with them – even as they rounded up and murdered 6 million Jewish people.

How are we wearing the badge of Christian? Does it look like Christ? Or have we tried to make Christ look like us?

Besides being called Thaddeus, Judas (not Iscariot), Lebbaeus, it’s thought that he might have worn the badge of another name – that of Zealot.

There is a theory among some biblical scholars about the lists of disciples found in the gospels. Those biblical scholars point out that Peter, James, and John always come first in these lists – a fact that is often attributed to the idea that these three were the closest to Jesus and the natural leaders of the other disciples.

These same biblical scholars point out that just as Peter, James, and John are the first three listed each time, *the same four always come last*: Thaddeus, Judas Iscariot, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who is identified as a Zealot. They suggest that perhaps these four were grouped together last because all of them were associated with the violent political party known as the Zealots.

The Zealots had a passionate nationalism. They pointed back to King David as their great hero – the one who united Israel and with military might put it on the map as a real force to be reckoned with – at least for a very short time. The Zealots were known for their violent insurrections in their efforts to overthrow Roman occupation in Jerusalem. They believed that being the chosen people of God meant that they were to be the rulers over the rest of humanity.

Which, of course, sounds nothing like the Jesus who said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Interesting then, isn’t it, that it might be that up to a third of the men that Jesus first attracted had some connection with Zealots?

Thaddeus or Judas (not Iscariot) is quoted in scripture only one time, and it is was to ask Jesus a question on the night before he was crucified: “Lord, how is that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?”

It seems like a strange question, unless we understand Thaddeus – or Judas (not Iscariot) – to have been a Zealot. The Zealots were waiting in anticipation for the Messiah to come, but they believed the Messiah would come in power and take back

Israel. They believed the Messiah would come like a super soldier, not that different than Superman or Captain America — a superhero who would give Israel a military advantage over Rome.

In other words, Thaddeus was waiting for Jesus to don his cape and take over everything. “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” He kept waiting for Jesus to be Messiah that *he* wanted Jesus to be.

If left unchecked, we can become violently zealous in the name of God, too.

Eugene Peterson tells the story of his first Christian convert. He says that for months after entering the first grade, he was terrorized by a bully named Garrison Johns. As a kid in Sunday School, he had been taught not to fight — to turn the other cheek. And so, most afternoons after school, he got to practice turning the other cheek — getting bruised and bloodied by Garrison Johns who called him, “Jesus sissy.”

That went on until March. One afternoon, Peterson was in his neighborhood with seven or eight others when Garrison caught up with them and started in on him, “jabbing and taunting, working himself up to the main event.”

He says, “That’s when it happened. Totally uncalculated. Totally out of character. Something snapped within me. For just a moment the Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he was. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest, and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn’t believe it — he was helpless under me... It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good, and I hit him again — blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on. ‘Black his eyes!’ ‘Bust his teeth!’

I said to Garrison, ‘Say uncle.’ He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More blood. More cheering... And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, ‘Say, “I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”’ He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More blood. I tried again, ‘Say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.’”

And he said it. Garrison Johns was my first Christian convert.

Garrison Johns was my introduction into the world, the ‘world that is not my home.’ He was also my introduction to how effortlessly that same ‘world’ could get into me, making itself perfectly at home under cover of my Christian language and ‘righteous’ emotions” (*Pastor*, 47-48).

It’s not just the Zealots or the Nazi’s who assume Jesus is on their side. Sometimes we do it, too.

But Jesus wasn’t interested in becoming Thaddeus’ version of the Messiah. That’s because his wasn’t the way of violence or of power or of force — but of love.

“Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” (John 14:22). Jesus answered, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).

William Barclay says, “Jesus was telling Thaddeus that the only loyalty that was of any use to him was the loyalty of the loving heart and the surrendered life... The way of power can never be a substitute for the way of love” (*The Master’s Plan*, 120).

This Messiah would not take the path the Zealots wanted. His way – his highest principle – was the way of love. It’s just a few verses after Thaddeus’ question that Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another” (John 15:11).

I think we sometimes hope that Jesus might come back sooner rather than later, so that we don’t have to love those who are difficult to love or love those who have done us wrong or love those that we don’t want to love.

The truth is, the way of love is hard. And if we say that we want to be Christian – we want to wear that badge of Christian – then we best expect that Jesus will give us the opportunity to practice.

Take this past week, for example. Last week, I closed my sermon with Tom Long’s story of Marshall – you remember? Marshall was the man who stumbled into the downtown Atlanta church high on crack cocaine. He was met by someone who cared enough to pray for him and help him get the care he needed. Do you remember how the story closed – all of those new members going around the table talking about why they were joining: the choir, the youth program, the minister? And Marshall said, “I’m joining this church, because I was saved in this church.”

Long finished the story by saying, “We all looked at each other rather sheepishly. We were there for the parking. Marshall was there for the salvation.”

Well, after church and after nearly everyone else had left, I stepped out the door and was met by a man we’ll call, Stephen. Stephen didn’t hold back. Right up front, he told me that he is meth addict and that he needed help. He was hungry. He was thirsty. And he needed to use the restroom, so that (and I quote) he wouldn’t have to go outside like an animal.

Do you see what happened there? I couldn’t very well preach about Marshall and then turn a blind eye to Stephen, could I? Not unless I wanted to be one of those people who wear the badge, but don’t live the life.

So I brought Stephen into the church to use the restroom. I got him a bottle of water. I gave him a gift card to a grocery store for some food. And I put my hand on his shoulder and I prayed for him. My hope was that in those acts of kindness, I had given him enough dignity to get through another day without using.

But I have had enough experience from these types of encounters now to know how it goes. Once you provide help, it can be like opening Pandora's box. You help the Stephens of the world once, and they might just keep showing up. Well, come Tuesday morning, guess who showed up at the church door...

This time, though, Stephen wanted more than a restroom and grocery store gift card. He wanted to detox. An hour or so and some 15 phone calls later, I was cancelling my afternoon appointments for the day and loading Stephen and his few possessions up into my car so that I could drive him to a detox facility.

Now, here's where the story gets interesting: on Tuesday morning, the last thing I wanted to do was to help Stephen. In fact, I did not want to help him, not even a little bit, not even at all. I have played this game before. I have done it with others. I don't like questioning whether I'm being told the truth or being lied to. I don't like working to make arrangements only to have the person not follow through. I don't like feeling used. I didn't want to do it. I did not want to help Stephen, let alone try to love him as Christ does.

But somewhere in the midst of all of it, I remembered this story that Mother Teresa used to tell. She said that some people came to Calcutta, and before leaving they begged her: "Tell us something that will help us to live our lives better."

In response, she said, "Smile at each other; smile at your wife, smile at your husband, smile at your children, smile at each other — it doesn't matter who it is — and that will help you to grow up in greater love for each other."

Then one of them asked her, "Are you married?"

And Mother Teresa said, "Yes, and I find it difficult sometimes to smile at Jesus." She went on, "It is true, Jesus can be very demanding also, and it is at those times when he is so demanding that to give him a big smile is very beautiful."

So, when Stephen climbed out of my truck to go check into detox, I smiled at him. I hope it encouraged him, but truth be told, I smiled at him for me — because I don't want to be the kind of person who sees other people simply as problems or interruptions to my schedule. I want to be the kind of person whose way is love — even when it's difficult or uncomfortable or costly.

That's what Thaddeus learned that day. He learned that if Jesus is going to be revealed to the world, it will be because his disciples have chosen the way of love.

Thank God for Thaddeus, whose question reveals to us that love and not power or violence or coercion is the way of Jesus.

Amen.