betrayed his brother, Michael Corleone, almost getting him killed? The litany of villains, backstabbers and betrayers could go on and on and on; but to this short list, we add Judas, Peter, and Pilate. What can we learn from these three characters?

**Judas’ Greed.** The betrayal of Judas was adeliberate, premeditated, and conscious act, taken by a man corrupted by greed and motivated by ambition. Of the three betrayals, his was the most personal and mean-spirited. Judas was the mole in the operation, his very name forever associated with treachery and betrayal. A “Judas” is a treacherous, lying, thieving lowlife. A “Judas kiss” is any traitorous action disguised as a show of affection. A Judas tree is the name given to the alder tree from which Judas hanged himself. A Judas hole is a small opening in a door through which a person can spy without being seen from the other side, like the peepholes used in apartments and hotel room doors.

Jesus knew there was a mole in the organization, a leak that would lead to the temporary collapse of his ministry. Jesus once said, “‘*Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.’ He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him*” (John 6:70-71). Greed provoked Judas’s betrayal. Judas was always driven by the bottom line. Recall his negative reaction to Mary’s use of an expensive ointment with which she bathed the feet of Jesus (John 12:3-5). Judas even became the treasurer, shepherding what funds the disciples shared. Judas was in on all the Twelve’s activities; Jesus did not try to exclude him. Judas was anxious that Jesus lay claim to his crown and kingdom. Judas did not understand that Jesus’ kingdom as not of this world.

This betrayal was motivated chiefly by greed, but no doubt also by disappointment and disillusionment. Judas arranged for the enemies of Jesus to come at night and meet Jesus with overwhelming force. When Judas greeted Jesus, he kissed him on the cheek. This is a betrayal stunning in its conception and diabolical in its execution. You cannot get more personal than a kiss, and it was the kiss that signaled the arrest and put plans to execute Jesus into motion.

**Peter’s Cowardice.** The second person to betray Jesus was Peter, a member of the inner circle. Peter’s betrayal took place as Jesus is interrogated by Annas the High Priest, assisted by his son-in-law, Caiaphas, also a high priest. It is unlikely that Peter had ever in his life been on the wrong side of the law, his hot-tempered nature notwithstanding. He was fine in his own natural environment out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee catching tilapia. But Peter was a simple country boy from up north, out of his element in the big city of Jerusalem.

On the night of Jesus’ trial, Peter hung about the courtyard, warming his hands by a small fire. He remembered what the Lord said to him only hours earlier: “*Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times*.” Peter had vehemently protested: “*Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you*” (26:34-35).

Now, faced with accusations of being the disciple of a man on trial, Peter’s courage melted like butter in a frying pan. His first betrayal came when a servant girl observed, “*You also were with Jesus the Galilean*.” Peter replied, “*I don’t know what you are talking about*” (26:69-70). Moving away from her, Peter encountered a second servant girl who said to the crowd, “*This man was with Jesus of Nazareth*.” This time, Peter swore an oath, adding, “*I do not know the man*” (26:72). This was his second betrayal. The third betrayal occurred after some people in the crowd sidled up to Peter and noted, “*Certainly, you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you*.” At this, Peter’s eyes blazed with fury, and he cursed and swore: “*I do not know the man*.” Then the rooster crowed, and Peter ran away and “wept bitterly.”

**Pilate’s Weakness.** Pilate betrayed Jesus when he failed to put an end to the plotting that condemned Jesus. Pilate had the power to stop the irregular and illegal proceedings if he wanted to, but he was a spineless weakling. Pilate’s political position was tenuous and his grip on power shaky. Pilate loved the power and perks his job, so he betrayed Jesus to save his career. Pilate was weak: he put politics and personal gain before the Truth.

The Bible says that “*when Pilate saw that he could do nothing*,” he literally washed his hands before the crowd and passed the buck. “*I am innocent of this man’s blood*” (27:24). Truth is, Pilate could do something, but he chose to do nothing. He was a small, insignificant toady in the Roman governmental apparatus of this far-flung outpost of the empire. He could not care less what happened to Jesus. Pilate worked his way into a cushy posting, as a sycophant to the powers that be, and all he cared about was maintaining his lifestyle. The sooner this unpleasantness was over, the better.

Sometimes, it is downright inconvenient to stand up for Jesus and for every virtue, value, teaching, and truth for which Jesus stands. It was not personally expedient for Pilate to grow a spine, put on his big-boy pants, and stand up for the truth or for what is good, right, and fair. Instead, Pilate asked one ironic question: “*What is truth?*” (John 18:38). The Truth stood before him in the person of Jesus, but Pilate missed it. Whatever he thought the truth was, it was an inconvenient truth, and thus, Pilate goes down in history as a man who, when he had a great opportunity, completely mishandled it, securing his place in history’s Hall of Traitors.

**The Rest of Us.** So, why do *we* betray Jesus? It could be that our motives are the same as these three rogues: excessive greed, paralyzing cowardice, or moral weakness. Yet, it is also likely that we do not believe we *have* or that we *would* betray Jesus. Rather, on this Maundy Thursday, we will declare with Peter, “*Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you…even though I must die with you, I will not deny you*” (26:33, 35).

Yet, we keep our faith in a closet. We hide our light under a basket. We fail to reach out to our neighbors with the life-affirming good news of the Gospel. We act in distinctly un-Christ-like ways. We may render to God the things that are God’s, but we also try to cheat Caesar out of what belongs to Caesar. We use language that does not reflect a relationship with Jesus. Or we use words that are hurtful and frivolous. We can be abusive, degrading, and belittling of others. We bicker and gossip. We are unwilling to help when life gets messy.

All three of these figures regretted what they did. Their own actions condemned them, as will ours if we do not stay faithful and true. Given what is going on in our world right now, standing up for Jesus is not so much a radical thing as it is a moral imperative. This litany of failings does not indicate that we intend to be betrayers of Jesus; but it does indicate that we are human. Yet the distance between a God-fearing human and a god-less human is slight, since the latter can match Christians in every category of good behavior any day of the week, and sometimes do it better. But a god-less human does not claim to know Jesus. We do.

The problem for Christians is that when we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus, we must step up to the plate; we must, at least, match the well-meaning behavior of god-less but good human beings. Failing that, we are open to the accusation of the servant girl, “*You also were with Jesus the Galilean”…so why are you here by the fire pretending you don’t know him?”* (26:69). Is betrayal in our blood? As we ponder our complicit natures, let us pray that in our daily lives, we will remain faithful and true witnesses of our resurrected Lord.

Prayer: Surely. I would never betray you, never deny you. Surely? Beloved Jesus, give me the faith to doubt my righteousness. Give me the assurance to question, to examine myself honestly, to ask. Give me the confidence to wonder how I might betray your perfect love, to see. Give me grace to confess how my promises are broken, my heart broken. Give me the peace to be troubled by my smugness, and repent. Open my eyes to see that you see, that you know; and knowing, you keep right on loving me and eating with me. Amen.

**Betrayal in Our Blood**

Maundy Thursday, April 6, 2023 [Matthew 26:14-27:66](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+26%3a14-27%3a66&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Philadelphia, July 4, 1776. Independence Hall. The Second Continental Congress is meeting to adopt The Declaration of Independence. In so doing, the 13 American colonies sever their political connections to Great Britain, an act that Britain considers treasonous. Later, as the delegates gather to sign the Declaration, Benjamin Franklin - realizing the enormity of the situation – lays aside his quill and says to the assembly, “We must all hang together or, assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

Franklin and the other delegates did not hang, but soon thereafter, a 21-year-old patriot did. His name was Nathan Hale. The British hanged Hale in New York City as a small crowd gathered to watch near the southern end of where Central Park stands today. Reportedly, Hale’s last words were: “I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.”

Hale’s execution is well-known. What is less well-known is that General George Washington ordered the execution of colonists accused of being traitors to thew American cause. Loyalist David Farnsworth was executed for counterfeiting money, creating a threat to the fledgling economy. Loyalist Moses Dunbar was executed for recruiting men for the British Army.

Of course, the most well-known American traitor is General Benedict Arnold, who negotiated with the British to hand over the fortifications at West Point on the Hudson River in New York. Arnold did not feel he was treated with the respect he deserved for winning the Battle of Saratoga (NY). Arnold resented that his commanding officer, General Horatio Gates took the credit. Had Arnold’s betrayal of West Point succeeded, the British might have isolated New England from the other states. Fortunately, Washington’s agents discovered Arnold’s treachery before the British could secure the fort and split the American forces in two.

Betrayal is very a human act. Literature is replete with dirty double-crossers. Iago from *Othello*. Fernand Mondego, in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, who falsely accuses his best friend Edmond of treason, has him imprisoned for 14 years, and steals Edmond’s fiancée, Mercédès. Peter Pettigrew, a.k.a. Wormtail, of the *Harry Potter* books. Edmund, the youngest Pevensie brother, who betrays his siblings and all of Narnia for a bag of Turkish Delight in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. And what was Fredo thinking when he