



## Any Questions?

John 14:22-29

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Message: With long-held religious beliefs in tow, Judas imagines he's earned a VIP pass with God. Yet Jesus declares God's love includes those not in line with Judas' personal creed. With belief in Christ - not in my creed - we may live by the affirmation that "God loves the world". And even if we find it hard to have faith in God, God believes in us, and in those not like us.

**I. INTRODUCTION:** As we gather for worship either here or online, questions follow us into the pew or around our house. Will the fighting in Ukraine ever end? How will I manage this health diagnosis? We all have our questions. Today's text swirls around this question and a response. "Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" What are we to do with our nearly unanswerable, difficult questions?

Christians have a longstanding pattern to engage our questions with the scriptures. But like brushing our teeth this engagement is habitual, and easy to overlook. Here's the well-worn pattern followed in this congregation. First - to show the prominence of scripture - a bible rests on the pulpit or close at hand in the pew rack. Second, the scriptures are read for all to hear. And last of all, a message is delivered to bridge the gap between what the bible says and what it means. But beware, any insights into our questions may not be what we expect.

Forty years ago, Arnold, was interviewed to become pastor of a congregation. What he didn't know was the congregation's penchant for reading only the 1611 King James Bible. This is the Shakespearian sounding version with old English words like "thee", "thou" and "thus".

In any event Arnold enters the room where four men, all clothed in a no-nonsense demeanor, sit behind a table. Someone has forgotten to put out a seat for Arnold, so one of the men pulls a folding chair from an adjacent closet and places it in front of the table. The chair groans as Arnold's weight settles in for some heavy questioning. Where did you attend school? What are your pastoral strengths, and so forth. Then, not unexpectantly, someone asks, "Tell us, what kind of Bible do you have?" Arnold says, "I have a big, black one." Silence descends upon the room like darkness covered the earth at the dawn of time. In much the same way, Jesus' response to Judas' question places Judas in the silent mode.

**II. JUDAS TIMES TWO:** But before Judas asks his question Jesus had announced to his 12 hand-picked disciples that he's leaving soon. The sparse details of when and why he's leaving opens the door for questions in chapter 14 from Thomas, from Philip and last of all from Judas.

Did you see in today's reading how John gives us a literary "heads up"? John wants us to know this is Judas (not Iscariot) by marking off (not Iscariot) in parenthesis. This isn't the Judas who tipped his hand at the Last Supper, and betrays him for 30 Roman coins. Does John point this out only to remind us there are two Judas' among the 12? Maybe. But perhaps he's saying both Judas and Judas Iscariot betray their allegiance --- BUT FOR DIFFERENT reasons. The well-known Judas Iscariot betrays out of greed. Follow the money, we say. But today's Judas betrays Jesus' message by crowing loudly about his personal beliefs. Even in our time when someone does this or that he holds up the shield of personal faith. Can't touch that!

**III. QUESTION:** Here again Judas's question and capitalize "To Us" for emphasis, "Lord, "Do you intend to manifest yourself TO US and NOT TO THE WORLD?" "TO US" is a reference to the 12 disciples. But what's exposed in the weeds around Judas' question is an assumption about who's in and who's out with God. Imagine Judas' words visually with "TO US" displayed on a billboard in Times' Square. But "to the world" is only a numbered footnote at the bottom of a page stored in a basement library. Judas assumes his personal view grants him something like VIP tickets for Disney World, while everybody else endures endless lines that never advance.

As with Arnold, congregations often sift through candidates like panning for gold to find those with the right answers. In some places candidates must echo Bruce Springsteen's, "Born in the U.S.A." - no foreign-born persons considered. In other places, front runners for the pastoral role are white only - male only - or in the words of Bill Coffin, reserved for those who imagine God 'N Country is one word. In plain view Judas seeks to limit God to those most like him or perhaps most like us.

**IV. A GENEROUS RESPONSE:** But Jesus says something entirely different: "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." Those who keep his word display devotion, rather than a requirement from God. Why? Because the manifestation of God's loves in the crucified and ever living Christ is God's gift to the world, and yes, even to both Judas'. Any Questions?

At a recent small gathering where we live, each person introduces themselves. When the event ends, a woman approaches me wearing a pair of black framed glasses and hands me a question, "Did you say you are a retired pastor?" "Guilty," I say. "38 years with the UMC."

She says, "I've been attending an Anglican Church across from the courthouse in Fairfax City.

I say, "I remember this church from when I pastored in there. It was Episcopal then."

"Oh, do you know why they changed?" she asks. I say, "Can't say for sure. About 20 years ago the Episcopal Church elected Gene Robinson - who happens to be gay - bishop. Many congregations split over that, and still find it disruptive."

She recoils, "Well, I don't believe in that." I say, "You don't believe in what?"

She says, "I mean I don't personally believe a homosexual can be a Christian pastor." Her view isn't unique. Even in our own UMC the ordination of homosexuals is divisive.

For me, what's most troubling isn't our differences, it's the spirit or way Christians ignore helpful ways to engage our differences. Based on long held notions, we split into sides. We cast votes to create losers with those Christians who are to believe in Christ rather than believing in personal beliefs. And last of all, when some part of humanity is voted off the island, the winners cheer. Like with sporting

events we don't want to end in a draw. Yet, we've been given the Holy Spirit to engage our differences in ways that create winners out of all humans as in this kind of praying: "Dear Lord, help Christians to talk **with** my homosexual son, as an equal, with faith in you, and a passion to lead your church?"

**V. SEARCH:** The lady then asks a crucial question: "What's the bible say?" "Oh, the bible says many things." I have nine coats in my closet. The bible says, if I have more than one coat, I'm to give away the others. In another place the King James version of the Bible says, "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee."

Searching for what the Bible alone says is like consulting a 1955 encyclopedia to find the names of the Astronauts who walked on the moon in 1968. If this is the only book our children and grandchildren read, they have a problem. The 1955 encyclopedia is silent on questions arriving in 1968, as the bible is silent on many questions following us into church in May, 2022.

When Jesus says he's leaving, he never promises an updated addendum to the bible every 10 years. Instead, we are promised the Holy Spirit as Counselor. The Spirit, with a capital "S" can help us worship God with our differences because our unity is our faith in Christ. The Spirit helps us read aloud the only bible we will ever have. The Spirit helps us engage with the sermon so we may discern not only what the bible says or never said all those years ago, but what it means with us today. The Spirit helps us encounter a never anticipated living Word.

**VI. HOLY COUNSEL:** Our two-year-old granddaughter lives in a small, uncomplicated world that includes a ragged pink pig, a six-year-old brother, and her mother and father. We've come today to babysit. As mom and dad move towards the door to gather their keys, our granddaughter begins whimpering - softly at first, and then with increasing volume until the room fills with protest, like a lion's roar. She rushes to wrap her arms around the leg of her mother, and then as we pull her way, her parents leave. She runs to the window calling for her parents against the glass pane. Tears wash down her cheeks as they pull away in the car.

It's now the grandparent's task to restore order! Grandparents are older and more experienced, but our experience with grandchildren is birthed in each new moment. With words we urge her to stop crying, we tell her mom and dad will return soon but this is met with more crying, more tossing herself onto the floor. After repeated failure WE change OUR approach. We give up our old, well-seasoned ways to discover the world through the experience of our grandchild. We place the pink pig in her hands. We give her milk. We wipe her tears. We hold her close. We watch unity enter the room and our hearts.

**What would happen if we give up speaking against those not like us - with those experiencing life in ways we've never experienced - with those whom God loves as much as a grandparent loves their grandchildren? Any Questions?**