

The Arrest
Matthew 26.47-56
Sermon by Dan Schrock
April 13, 2014, Palm/Passion Sunday

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." ⁴⁹At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁵²Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" ⁵⁵At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Most of us have kissed—or been kissed—at one time or another. When our sons were small, I probably I kissed each of them at least a thousand times, plus however many times Jenny kissed them. We don't kiss our sons anymore—a fact for which they are profoundly grateful—although Jenny and I still kiss each other frequently. Most of us were kissed as young children, and some of us adults may indulge ourselves in the occasional kiss with our own children or grandchildren, nieces or nephews, intimate friends or spouses.

Kissing is for intimate, trusting relationships. Consider the holy kiss, which some North American Mennonites used to practice more than we do now. The holy kiss was based on four references in the letters of Paul.¹ It was a kiss on the cheeks between two members of the church which symbolized friendship, mutual trust, and unity within the body of Christ. In Mennonite circles it was usually limited to same-sex kissing rather than cross-sex kissing.

¹ Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; and 1 Thessalonians 5:26.

Once in high school I took a trip to Maryland with some friends of mine. We stayed overnight in the house of their grandfather. When we were ready to leave the next morning, the grandfather said goodbye by kissing everyone. I thought he did this because my friends were members of his family. But after kissing them he turned to me and asked, “Are you baptized?” I nodded my head, wondering why he would ask an odd question like that. Without hesitating, he gently embraced me and kissed me on the cheek. I was completely confused for a moment until I realized this must be the famed holy kiss I had heard about from older people in my home congregation. None of my acquaintances back in Indiana were still practicing the holy kiss, but clearly this 80-something Mennonite grandfather in Maryland was. It may have been the only time anyone gave me the holy kiss of Mennonite brotherhood/sisterhood.

Kissing is a kinesthetic experience. The kiss I received from that Maryland grandfather involved more than a touch of his lips on my cheek. I was embraced in a full-body hug. With my fingertips I felt his soft flannel shirt. I smelled his coffee breath. The whiskers on his unshaved face rubbed their prickly selves on my soft cheek. The whole experience lasted only a moment; but as you can tell, I remember it vividly 35 years later because it was so physical.

Matthew’s story of Jesus’ arrest is highly kinesthetic, starting with that kiss from Judas. This is no holy kiss of friendship between spiritual brothers. Instead it’s a kiss of heart-breaking betrayal. That Judas would betray Jesus with a kiss is shocking. For the last three years, Judas has followed Jesus around Galilee and Judea. Judas watched Jesus preach the famed sermon on the mount (Matt 5-7). Judas heard Jesus tell parables about wheat and mustard seeds and yeast (Matt 13). Judas was one of the disciples who passed out bread and fish to 5,000 people—and then when everyone had eaten heartily, he

helped collect more leftover food than they handed out. Judas saw Jesus touch the sick, smile at sinners, and roll his eyes at the Pharisees. Judas should have been Jesus' friend, Jesus' follower, Jesus' faithful. But now here in Gethsemane, Judas double-crosses Jesus with a kiss.

The verb Matthew uses makes this even more astonishing. When Matthew says in verse 49 that Judas "kissed him," the Greek word (*kataphilein*) means to kiss repeatedly, fervently, energetically. This isn't a wimpy kiss. It isn't even a holy kiss. Instead it's an extended and forceful kiss, the sort of kiss you use for someone you love very much. We don't know if Judas hugs Jesus. We don't know whether Judas kisses Jesus on the lips, the cheek, the forehead, or the neck. But based on the Greek word, we know it is passionate kiss. Most of all, we know Judas doesn't mean it. His pretended passion is a lie. The kiss is a sham. What gets us is not so much the betrayal, because after all, people have betrayed each other plenty of times in history. What gets us more than anything else is *how* Judas does it: with a blatantly deceptive kiss.

Let us notice some of the story's other kinesthetic details. It is night, and a large crowd marches to Gethsemane. People in the crowd carry swords and clubs in their hands. Swords of the time came in many sizes, ranging from the long broadsword to the short dagger, each of which was used in different ways depending on the kind of fighting the person planned to do. Clubs were made of iron or wood studded with iron. Both swords and clubs could do tremendous damage to a human body. Think of a sword being thrust from the bottom of your rib cage up into your heart. Think of a club smashing into your skull. These are deadly weapons.

The crowd arrests Jesus by laying their hands on him. See the swords aimed at his heart and the clubs raised over his head. See large, rough hands grab his arms. Watch someone snatch his hair and pull hard, twisting Jesus' neck. Smell the

sweaty bodies and the hot breath. Feel the tension in the air. At any moment this whole situation could erupt into a battle, with the crowd on one side and Jesus and his disciples on the other. In fact, things do get violent when one of Jesus' disciples pulls out a sword and uses it to cut off the ear of the high priest's slave. Blood spurts from the wound. A thorough-going fight has begun where a lot of people could get wounded or killed.

At this moment Jesus intervenes. "Put the swords away!" he commands. He tells his disciples he can easily defend himself against the crowd with his swords and clubs. All he has to do is ask God for angelic help, and instantly God will send 12 legions of angels to protect him. In the Roman world a legion at full strength consisted of 6,000 soldiers. With a prayer and a snap of the fingers, Jesus can fight back with 72,000 angels—way more than enough to handle this motley crowd of temple police and ruffians, and also more than enough to defeat the 3 legions which Rome stationed permanently in Antioch, Syria. Jesus can easily take the route of violence and win. With 72,000 angels behind him, he can defeat the Romans and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. All it would take is a prayer and a snap of the fingers.

But Jesus does not use violence. He does not defend himself. Instead he lets himself be arrested. He permits himself to be captured and taken away. In a very concrete way, he lives out his own advice that he gave his disciples in Matthew 5:38-45:

³⁸"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of God in heaven.”

This story from Matthew 26 is one of the core texts of pacifism in the entire Bible. Sadly, it never appears in the Revised Common Lectionary. It’s as if the Catholic and mainline Protestant creators of the lectionary do not want to deal with a story that so obviously rejects violence and so clearly embraces peace.

It may be that the disciples do not want to deal with it either, because they all desert Jesus and flee into the darkness of night (v. 56). In a way their desertion is just as dastardly as Judas’ betrayal. In Jesus’ hour of need, all the disciples abandon him.

Jesus teaches peace and lives peace; and for him, peace begins with an inward disposition. Jesus does not get angry at Judas who betrays him, at the crowd that arrests him, or at the disciples who abandon him. Instead he shows mercy. Perhaps we could say that mercy toward others is the heart of peacemaking. The heart of peacemaking is showing Jesus’ mercy to violent people. The soul of peacemaking is acting charitably to people who fail to support you when times get tough.

Let us claim for our own lives the spirit of peacemaking which we see in Jesus. Let our kisses have integrity. Let our embraces be true. Let our friendship be steadfast. Let our enemies be blessed with mercy.