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Judas Read: Acts 1:15-20

As we know from the Gospels, opposition has been a part of the story since the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Right after his baptism, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. The opposition to Jesus and his message shows up in other ways as well. Various individuals, groups of people, demons, and Roman authorities work against Jesus in his lifetime. Even Jesus' disciples, at times, oppose him (Remember the time Jesus called Peter Satan? – see Matthew 16:23).

Of course, the disciple we most associate with opposition to Jesus is Judas. He is, after all, the one who betrays Jesus. Only Matthew and Luke—Acts record Judas' fate. The two stories are quite different.

- Read Matthew 27:3-10. Compare this with Luke-Acts version. What things are similar? What things are different?
- Why do you think Judas did what he did? What were his motivations?

For Luke-Acts, Judas is an agent of Satan. After his temptation by Satan in the wilderness, Luke says that the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time (Luke 4:13). The opportune time arises just as Jesus and the disciples are preparing to celebrate the Passover/Last Supper. Luke says quite explicitly, "Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot." He meets with the chief priests and temple police who agree to pay him if Judas will betray Jesus. Judas agrees and begins to look for a time to do so (Luke 22:3-6). There can be no doubt here. Judas acts on behalf of Satan.

The story we read in Acts, records Judas' death, but it never mentions Satan outright. We learn the additional detail that Judas used the money he received to purchase a field. Buying land was one way in the ancient world to preserve wealth and gain some security. But it's all for nothing. Judas dies before he can enjoy his new found security. Somehow he falls on the land and is disemboweled. This pollutes the land itself and the field becomes known as Hakeldama, or Field of Blood.

It's worth comparing this part of the story to Acts 4:32-37. Judas embodies the values of greed and concern for oneself without regard to the well-being of others. But in this passage in chapter four, we hear how the Spirit leads the early community to embody the opposite values. The early Christians are moved to sell their lands and fields in order to share the proceeds with the community for the

sake of the community and for the sake of the spread of the gospel. Unfortunately, the satanically influenced values embodied by Judas don't die with him. They creep up again and again to oppose the church. The call of the church, the new life Christians are called to live, is a life that embodies liberation from these powers and influences.

- Skinner writes, "Attributing all [wickedness] to 'Satan' sounds too convenient and hasty to overlook the evil that humanity generates all on its own." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? How can talking about satanic influence and power help the church? How can it harm the church?
- What forces/powers/ideologies today oppose the church?

Simon the Magician Read Acts 8:9-24

This story is actually a part of another story that we have already concerned – the conversion of the Samaritans. At the time we skipped over the conversion of Simon. Now we have a chance to consider his part of the story.

Magic was the word used in the ancient world to describe wonder-working powers, powers that amazed and went beyond the ordinary even extraordinary kinds of deeds people were used to witnessing. Magicians were thought to have the power to manipulate the unseen forces and powers of the world, usually for the benefit of the magician or his/her benefactor. In our story, Simon is believed to be performing magic in the name of a god called Great (8:10). The word, magic, is generally used in such a way as to be critical of it. Jewish law forbids its practice seeing it as obedience to false gods or idols (see Deuteronomy 18:9-14). Acts follows Deuteronomy's take and considers magic to be a sign of someone's allegiance to false powers or their spiritual ill-health.

For us today, magic usually suggests some kind of trick or deception or illusion. We enjoy being amazed by the show that Penn and Teller can put on. And while we, ourselves, may not know how the trick is done, deep down we know that it is a trick – an act of distraction or the clever use of mirrors or secret hidden compartments. But Acts does not treat magic that way. Simon is not presented as a fraud, but as someone who really can manipulate unseen forces and perform great deeds of power. The issue for Acts is who (or what) stands behind the power.

Skinner notes that both Philip and Simon probably performed similar deeds of power. That word "power" in Greek is *dunamis* and leads to the English words dynamite and dynamic. When translations talk about the deeds of power that

Philip performs in the name of Jesus, it uses the word, miracle. But when Simon performs a similar deed of power in the name of Great, the text refers to those deeds as magic. So what distinguishes the two deeds of power? In short, their motivation. Simon performs deeds of power for a price, for prestige, in order to have influence over others, Philip does not. Philip performs deeds of power in response to his faith, as a way to care for others and to share God's salvation with them.

- Writing about the Second Commandment (You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God) in the Small Catechism, Luther writes: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name, but instead use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God." How does Luther's explanation help clarify the distinction between "magic" and "miracle" in this story?

Acts is also critical of the ways in which magicians use their power to make money and use their money to buy or gain influence. This issue comes front and center after Simon is baptized. He witnesses the pouring out of the Holy Spirit as the apostles lay hands on the Samaritans and he wants a part of it. So he goes to Peter and offers him money in exchange for the power to call down the Holy Spirit (8:18-19). Peter is outraged; but not because Simon wants to share in his power, rather because Simon thinks this power is purchasable (8:20-21). What his offer to Peter reveals is that Simon has not given up his old ways. He still equates money and power. He assumes that money can buy God's, or the Spirit's, power. He assumes that he can tap into the power of God to ensure his on-going fame. The story of Simon, reminds us that the Christian life calls us to a new way of life characterized by the values embodied by Jesus.

- How should Christians think about using power and influence in the world today?
- Skinner writes, "Following Jesus and honoring his teaching usually entail unlearning other values and patterns." What values and patterns have you unlearned in your own life as Jesus' follower? Which ones do you think you still need to unlearn to follow him more faithfully?
- Writing about baptism in the Small Catechism, Luther says "[Baptism] signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." This suggests that, although we are only baptized once in our lives, we practice our

baptism daily. How do you practice your baptism? How do you daily die to sin and rise to new life?