

Forgiveness as a Gift of Love: Pascal Fessler's *Return of Judas*

Pascal Fessler's 2010 painting *Return of Judas* imagines a moment the Gospels never describe: Judas Iscariot returning to face the other apostles after betraying Jesus. Fessler sets the scene in a stark gray room. Judas stands in an open doorway, flooded with white light from behind. He wears modern clothes—jeans and a red sweatshirt—bringing this ancient story into our own time. His face is shadowed, and his shadow is interrupted by a long white table, suggesting the tomb-like weight between him and the others.

Six figures sit at the table, slumped and despondent. None look at Judas.

Their eyes drop to their hands; one covers his face, another wipes tears. One figure touches Eucharistic bread and a red cup, the only other red in the painting besides Judas's sweatshirt. The color echoes the blood of Christ: shed for the forgiveness of sins and also shed through betrayal. The table could be a place of communion, or of exclusion.

The Gospels themselves leave unresolved questions about intention and responsibility. In Matthew, Judas's betrayal looks premeditated and transactional: "What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him over to you?" Then he looks for a betrayal opportunity (Matthew 26:15-16). Mark also emphasizes the same deliberate step, noting, "Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them" (Mark 14:10-11). Luke records Judas's approach to the priests in spiritual terms: "Then Satan entered Judas Iscariot..." (Luke 22:3-4) and John echoes it: "After this, Satan entered him..." (John 13:27). Is Judas acting freely, calculating his betrayal, or is he overcome, his agency swallowed up by darkness? Depicted as both willing and overtaken is an uncomfortable mirror of how our own sins can be chosen, yet shaped by fears and wounds we carry. Additionally, Judas was not the only one who failed: Peter, too, denied



Pascal Fessler, *Return of Judas* (2010).
Acrylic on canvas (27.6 x 39.4 inches).

Jesus three times.

What is clear is that after Jesus' arrest, Judas was filled with remorse. He returned the silver and confessed. But remorse is not the same as repentance, and Judas's story ends in despair rather than restoration. For centuries, artists and theologians alike have portrayed him as the ultimate villain, the exception to mercy. But Fessler's painting asks another question: what if Judas's remorse opened into repentance? What if he returned to the disciples not to justify himself, but to seek mercy?

By placing *Return of Judas* in a contemporary context, Fessler turns the question toward us. Could we look at Judas? Could we make space for the person whose failure feels unforgivable? Fessler places the viewer at the table in the discomfort of the moment—before anyone dares to lift their eyes.

Jesus' teaching leaves little room for exceptions. He commands his disciples to forgive "70 times seven times" (Matthew 18:21-22) and that refusing to give mercy places us outside the mercy we ourselves have received (Matthew 18:23-35). Forgiveness is not an abstract virtue but an act of love. After Judas leaves the table of the Last Supper, Jesus issues a new command: "Love one another" (John 13:34).

In Fessler's painting, the story remains unfinished. Judas stands waiting. Perhaps no one will look up, and Judas will withdraw from the door wishing he'd never been born. Or perhaps someone will meet his gaze and invite him to the table—to remain one of the Twelve—and allow time for forgiveness and redemption to unfold. *Return of Judas* leaves us with that open possibility. Forgiveness is love's hardest gift: when Judas stands waiting, do we look up?

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