

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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First Sunday in Lent

Thaddaeus

1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
Mark 3:13-19a

I can't help but wonder, if Thaddaeus were here, what he would have to say for himself. Or about himself. Or about the fact that he gave up three years of his life, three years when he didn't watch his children grow up, learn to walk, begin to talk, get ready for the prom, or play in basketball tournaments. Three years when he wasn't there for his father and mother, as his mother grew sicker and weaker and finally died, and his father faded into the woodwork of the old family homestead. Three years when he could have been working, should have been supporting his family, could have been tucking away a little nest egg for he and his wife in their older years, money for travel, money for the kids' education, money to see them through when times got tough. No, he walked away from all that when Jesus came knocking on his door. Jesus tapped him on the shoulder and invited him to come and be with him, and Thaddaeus went – and what did he have to show for it? His name was included in a list of names. That's all. Nothing more. Nothing less. He was one of the twelve. Period. He never managed to make a name for himself like Peter, James and John. Or Judas either for that matter. He could take some comfort in that. But still, it would have been nice to be remembered for something. The list didn't say where he came from or whose son he was. He never said or did anything that anybody remembered long enough to write it down or tell anybody about it. He was just there. What do you suppose he would tell us about what it was like if he were here today? What do you think it might have been like to have been in his place, to have walked with Jesus, to have watched it all unfold in Nazareth, in Bethany, and finally in Jerusalem?

I assume there'd been a kind of excitement to it to begin with. It was simply amazing to watch him work, to be in his presence, to hear him teach, to witness the healings and the feedings and the exorcisms. Jesus had a charisma that was simply unlike anything Thaddaeus had ever experienced anywhere else. And as long as he lived, he'd never forget what it felt like the first time he'd healed someone. To feel that power flow through him and into that man's legs had dropped him to his knees and reduced him to tears. Unbelievable! He really felt like they were making a difference. They were going to make things right. They were going to set their people free. They really were going to change the world, and he was thrilled to be a part of it.

But then something had changed. He wasn't quite sure what or when, but things started to turn sour. It was subtle at first, but he began to be aware of unfriendly faces standing on the edge of the crowds, watching them, taking notes, whispering to each other. He'd been aware of them for a little while, and then one day, Thaddaeus and some of the others finally talked about it. Things weren't right, and they were getting nervous. They hesitated a long time about what to do, but

finally they talked with Jesus about it. Or at least they tried to. But he just didn't seem interested. They couldn't get his attention and make him take them seriously. He just kept on doing and saying the same things. He healed when he wasn't supposed to heal. He talked with people he knew better than to talk with. He went anywhere, was willing to be seen with anyone, didn't seem to care what he did or how it played in the papers, who he offended or what nose he put out of joint. And as those unfriendly faces kept getting redder and redder, more and more unfriendly, he actually headed for Jerusalem. Didn't Jesus know how dangerous that was? Didn't he understand how much trouble he could get himself into – and all of the rest of them while he was at it? They had so much potential for doing so much good. Why did he seem so intent on throwing it all away?

Thaddaeus didn't know what to do. Judas came to him one day and told him that he was worried about the way things were headed, and he was thinking about putting a stop to it. Or at least giving Jesus a wake up call. Maybe if the authorities came and talked with him, threatened him a little bit, he'd smarten up and get things back on track. After thinking about it awhile, Thaddaeus had decided he couldn't work with Judas. What he was planning just wasn't right, but neither was the rest of this. What was Jesus thinking? Where was this heading? And what should any of them do about it?

The questions Thaddaeus was asking weren't all that different than the questions that we ask from time to time: what do we do when the things we've invested ourselves in begin to change? When they don't feel right anymore? How do we know what's right and good and the responsible, faithful thing to do? When do we go along to get along, play it safe and obey the rules? And when do we go out on a limb for something that feels so compelling that we can't quite imagine walking away? How do we know the limb won't get cut out from under us? What do we risk? And for what? Jesus' teachings and ministry and behavior threatened everything they'd ever stood for, and yet wasn't he also offering them even more than they'd ever dreamed was actually possible in this life? How could they know what to do?

Paul summed up a lot of the struggle when he talked about the message of the cross being foolishness. There are some people you just don't offend. Some rules you just don't break. Some things you just don't do. What can you possibly accomplish if you get nailed to a tree and it all gets cut short? Who wins then?

It's easy for us to look back at Thaddaeus and Judas and Peter and James and John, and know who wins, what's accomplished, what the value of doing it a different way was for Jesus. But it's harder for us when we're in the midst of the choices. When we're debating whether to stand up and speak up and challenge behavior that we know in the depths of our bones is wrong – regardless of who we may offend and what cost we may have to pay for our truth telling. When we're considering doing something, reaching for something, going somewhere that no earthly reason or thought process would contemplate or even give the time of day. When Jesus made his choices, he was tapped into a wisdom that reached beyond the ways and assumptions of this world – enough so that it looked down right foolish. And yet, because of the integrity with which he lived his life, his focus on the will of God, the expanse of God's love, the grace of God's welcome, we've been given the inconceivable gift of salvation. Of a life and a love and a power that death and hatred and evil can't stop.

We can't really know who Thaddaeus was, or what it was like for him to be a disciple of Jesus. But the questions that he faced aren't altogether different than the questions that we face as we decide how to follow, and as we wrestle with what God would have us do. The details are different, but the choices are more similar than we want to believe. How do we sift through the voices and values and choices and consequences in front of us? What would we have done if we'd been in Thaddaeus' shoes? And more importantly, what will we do in our own shoes as we strive to live as people of God?

Throughout the weeks of Lent, we'll be bringing you one of the characters of the Holy Week story, one of the lesser known people who played a part in the story leading up to Jesus' death. Our hope is that as we stand with them in the drama, we'll look in a new way on the drama of our lives and what it means to live and walk as people of faith, to be open to a voice and a leading and a way that defies the logic and assumptions of this world. What would we have done if we had been there? And given that we're here, now, in this time and place, what does it mean to follow Jesus in faith, in openness, as disciples?

Were you there when the answers seemed unclear... We're all there when the answers seem unclear. The question is what we will do. How we will decide. What our discipleship will look like.