

APRIL 1 2026 FATHER PETER JAE CHOI

In the olden days, Wednesday of Holy Week was called "Spy Wednesday." This is because Judas agreed to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, and he began to look for an opportunity to betray him to the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish elders.

We know the difference between a friend and a spy. A friend is someone whom you have a relationship with, and a spy is someone who pretends to be your friend, who betrays you by using information about you against you.

"Friend" is a word we use very often. Surprisingly, "friend" is a very broad term. It can range from someone who we have no relationship with to our best friend and confidant. What do we call those who we don't really know, or barely know from the social media connections and casual acquaintances? We call them friends. But what do you call people within our professional contacts that we maintain cordial and respectful relationships with? But more for business purposes? We call them friends too.

How about people we are very close to? We know them, and they know us very well, we like talking to them, and hanging out with them... We also call them friends. How about the long-term tested and true companions? We call them friends too. If you ask me, the gap between a casual acquaintance and a best friend is probably as wide as from here to the sun. There simply could be no comparison.

We all know Jesus is God. He knows everything about us. He knows our thoughts, our intentions, and even our future actions we haven't committed yet. So when Judas brought the Roman soldiers and temple police to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus already knew Judas was going to betray him. And yet, Jesus still called him a friend. Jesus did not call him a traitor or a backstabber, instead Jesus called him a friend,

because that's how Jesus saw Judas. Even when Judas betrayed him, still, Jesus didn't abandon his friendship with him.

Do you remember Jesus teaching his disciples about the value of friendship? Jesus told him that there is no greater love than the one who lays down his life for his friends. He told his disciples that they were not his servants, but his friends. Jesus is the good friend who lays down his life for us.

How about us? Are you—where are you in your relationship with Jesus? Let us not forget, God isn't surprised by our struggles and weaknesses. He knows them even better than we do ourselves. He's God. And he's a merciful God who gives us a second chance.

A few years ago I came across the very moving story of Andre Norman, who transformed his life from being an inmate and illiterate, to achieving his goals of attending Harvard University. Andre suffered through a very traumatic childhood. He grew up in a home marked by violence and poverty. He vividly recalls waking up to the haunting screams of his mother, a recurring victim of his father's violent outbursts. The scars of witnessing such trauma were deep, shaping Andre's worldview and moulding his early experience.

Andre began selling drugs in middle school, and became deeply entrenched in the life of crime, and climbed all the way to the top as a gang leader. After a series of run-ins with the police, including armed robbery, and eight counts of attempted murders, Andre was given a 100-year prison sentence. While in prison, he even became a gang leader there, controlling contraband and the black market across multiple maximum security facilities.

He wasn't afraid of anything. He wasn't even afraid of death, because he didn't care about his life. During two-and-a-half years in solitary confinement, he experienced an epiphany after witnessing his peers returning to jail, even after their release, and he made a life-altering decision. He didn't want to be in jail anymore. He wanted to get out of

jail and never return. He decided that his past would no longer dictate his future.

So he turned his life around, with the goal of attending Harvard University. Andre began his process of self-education. He spent eight years working 20 hours a day, educating himself. Soon, he was not just learning for himself, but teaching and mentoring fellow inmates. Andre's efforts did not go unnoticed. His transformation, and the positive impact he had on the prison community, caught the attention also of people outside of prison. He received the General Education Diploma, and continued to study the law in prison. He appealed and won his case for release in 1999.

After his release, Andre founded the Academy of Hope and Second Chance University organizations, to provide mentorship and education to those who are in prison. Today, Andre is well known as the ambassador of hope, using his past as a stepping stone rather than a stumbling block. He serves as a beacon of hope, and inspiration to those who are still in darkness, with an important message: Transforming is possible for anybody. It's never too late to start.

Life will always throw us a curveball, and we may find ourselves beaten down and feeling defeated. When that happens, remember the true friend we can find is in Jesus. Just when we think we have failed, Jesus is already there, to help us to get up, to start over again.

You know it wasn't only Judas who betrayed Jesus. Peter betrayed him too. He denied ever knowing him, not just once, but three times. The difference was the trust in God's mercy and love. Judas turned away from God and tragically ended his own life. Peter repented, and turned to God. Despite his failing, Peter was given a second chance and became the first pope.

Jesus is and always will be our friend. All we have to do is to choose him and his friendship.