

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Midweek Lent #2 – March 8th, 2017

Matthew 27:1-5

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. ² So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

³ When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.”

“What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.” ⁵ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Dear Children of our heavenly Father,

Sometimes people will ask me, Pastor, what do you do all day? Most of the time this is meant as an honest question and not an attack on what we do or don't do. In simple terms, we share God's Law and Gospel by preaching, teaching and encouraging based on God's Word. We help and we encourage. We pray and we pray some more. And one of the things that we pray about the most is that God will keep the members St. Luke's faith strong and secure. As a pastor, I've come to see the ministry as a risky business. You mine the Word as you prepare a sermon. You resolve to preach it with all your might . . . and some people don't even come to church to hear it! I've sat at my desk and tried to counsel members through sinful situations. I've shared the Word with them. The response sometimes? *“I know you have to say that because you work for the church . . .”* We do a great job, second to none, at training our youth in the faith. (Most of our eighth graders have received nine to ten years of full-time Christian education!) Statistically, one-quarter to one-third of them will not be attending church soon after they are confirmed. It hurts a pastor's heart when it becomes obvious that some are in no great hurry to get to heaven! The rebellion of those we love and care for is a painful reminder that Eden is in the rearview mirror and it's still a long way to heaven!

If we feel that way about our earthly members, how much more must God feel this about the members of his heavenly flock as he watches them turn away from him. It is likely that every one of us has felt the pain of someone who has walked away and turned to another path. How much pain, then, did Jesus feel that night in the Garden of Gethsemane when his friend became his foe and a kiss meant death?! It is our look at Judas that will lead our thoughts today as we:

Theme: Repent: Turn to Jesus and Do Not Turn Away

- 1. Sin leads us away**
- 2. Only Jesus' saving love brings us back**

Jesus and Judas were more than friends. They shared a spiritual fellowship. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all make a point of the fact that Judas from Kerioth was called by Jesus to be one of the twelve disciples.

We can therefore picture Judas sitting at Jesus' feet learning the Word and asking Jesus questions. Or think of this: Can you picture Judas preaching the Word, cleansing lepers, healing the sick, driving out demons, and even raising the dead? It's highly likely that he did all of these things, because that is precisely what Jesus commissioned his disciples to do in Matthew chapter 10. We can only assume that Judas was a zealous disciple, an eager servant, and a faithful follower. These are all biblical pictures of Judas Iscariot!

But then there is that most infamous picture of Judas, a man on a secret mission in Gethsemane: **“While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: ‘The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.’ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed him. Jesus replied, ‘Do what you came for, Friend’”** (Mt 26:47-50). Judas went from raising the dead to betraying the Lord of life. How did that happen? Judas didn't wake up one morning and say, “Today's the day I'm going to betray the Son of God.” Instead, Satan began to work on Judas' heart in a completely different way. Once Satan can stick his snake's head through a crack in the heart's door, the rest of Satan—and plenty of sin—will soon slither in!

What was the point of departure for Judas? Where did he take the wrong turn? The Bible sums it up in one word: *greed*. St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy that **“the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”** (1 Timothy 6:10). Judas is perhaps the ultimate poster boy of one who loved money too much. As a result, he ended up wandering away from the faith and turning away from Jesus. It did not end well for him!

The real tragedy, of course, is that Judas had been warned. He knew that his treasure was in heaven and that no moth or rust would ever be able to knock the shine off that treasure. He had been warned that a man could not serve both God and money. He had been taught the parable of the sower and the seed. With his own two ears, he heard that the deceitfulness of wealth can choke the Word right out of the heart. Judas may even have chuckled a bit when Jesus painted that absurd picture of a camel being crammed through the eye of a needle, which, of course, is easier to do than for a rich man to enter heaven. In spite of everything that Jesus taught Judas about a man's money and a man's heart, Judas *turned away from* Jesus and slowly, steadily *turned toward* the shine of silver and the glitter of gold.

It was probably innocent enough at first—sin always is. He was entrusted with the important job of keeping the disciples' treasury safe and in good order. Perhaps the trouble began by writing himself a “personal loan.” He would pay it back. Someday . . . Perhaps . . . We know for certain that some significant women with significant means were supporting Jesus and the disciples' ministry. Cash was consistently crossing his hands. Opportunity for lining his pockets came easy and often. Eventually, Judas' greed surfaced openly when Mary (of Mary and Martha fame) gave Jesus a most amazing gift: a gift of precious perfume poured upon Jesus' feet. Judas protested that this gift, worth an entire year's wages, could have been better used to care for the poor! Looking back on that event with inspired 20/20 hindsight, St. John knew charity wasn't on Judas' mind: **“He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it”** (Jn 12:6).

And then came the ultimate opportunity for easy money: his friendship with Christ put him in contact

with Christ's enemies. Rich, powerful enemies. Rich, powerful enemies who were willing to pay cold hard cash for just one kiss in the darkness. Note how very deliberate Judas' sins now became: He *discussed* this "business transaction" with the religious leaders. He *watched* for an opportunity to betray Jesus. He *led* the detachment of soldiers—*carefully picking out* the correct path to Gethsemane. He is even careful to cover his tracks in the garden with the *pre-arranged signal*—a kiss. Nothing like trying to save face with the other disciples while betraying Christ to his face!

Judas got his money: 30 paltry pieces of silver, the price of common slave. Oh, but how the silver glistened in the torchlight! It felt so very cool and solid in his hand. And he paid dearly for this deal: **"When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. 'I have sinned,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood.' 'What is that to us?' they replied. 'That's your responsibility.' So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself."** Judas got his money, but forfeited his soul. He suffers penniless in hell to this very night!

"Poor Judas!" No. How about instead, "God help us!" Scripture doesn't tell us Judas' story so that we can pity a dead man but so that we can avoid Judas' dead end. St. Paul's reminds us: **"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Co 10:12)**. Scripture is littered and hell is bursting with examples of people who were at one point true, faithful Christians—and yet who eventually turned away from Jesus! They turned away from God for foreign wives or another man's wife; turned away for money; turned away because they trusted another gospel, which was really no gospel at all; and turned away because they loved sexual immorality more than the bride of Christ. The sad story of Judas demonstrates a dreadful fact: for some, the road to hell leads straight through the doors of the church.

"I would NEVER fall away from Jesus!" I pray that's so. Seriously, I pray for that regularly! But I also have a feeling that once upon a time Judas thought those very same thoughts. We have never stolen a widow's offering money, but then again, we don't necessarily like hearing what the Bible says about money. We love to hear the Lord's Word, but then again, so did every member who has been dropped from church membership for consistently neglecting the Word and sacrament. I would never think of betraying Jesus, but then again, how many people outside the doors of church even know that I'm a Christian? I won't betray him; I'll just keep him secret! Then there is good old-fashioned greed, the sin of Judas. Society calls the relentless quest for earthly treasures "keeping up with the Joneses." I wonder out loud, however, is it really the Joneses we are keeping up with—or perhaps the Judases?

Listen. Greed, unconfessed sin, premeditated sin, and putting Jesus on a shelf and putting the world first is a toxic brew that can quickly turn us away from Jesus, turn us toward more sin, and quickly turn us around 180 degrees into unbelief.

2. Jesus' saving love brings us back

That's where Judas ended up—turning away from God to greed, from the Savior to silver, from disciple to unbeliever. And what is the most tragic turn of events? When Judas finally came to his senses after seeing Jesus led away like a lamb to the slaughter, he had a change of mind. Tragically, instead of turning to Jesus for full and free forgiveness, he turned instead to his guilty conscience and all of his sins' ugliness. Instead of turning to the Lord for mercy, he turned instead to the corrupt priests in an effort to

unbuy his betrayal. Returning the silver couldn't make the mess of his sin right. All the world's gold and silver can't make a single sin right! Only the innocent blood of Jesus can make the mess of our sin right. Judas—in the grips of satanic despair—grabbed for a noose instead of the lifeline of Christ's mercy.

Brothers and sisters, don't you dare turn toward your sin! Turn, instead, toward the Savior. Don't turn toward your guilt. Turn to your God! "But I've got greed in my heart, and lies on my lips, and blood on my hands, and lust in my eyes, and hate in the pit of my stomach, and dark thoughts in my head. Turn to Jesus? Me?"

Because of our sin, Jesus turns to us in love with every word he spoke and every deed he did. In the face of a lynch mob, Jesus told them to let his disciples go. Jesus, and Jesus alone, would endure the suffering and dying. As a betrayer kissed his face, Jesus called him friend. The hands that had reached out to touch and heal were freely offered to be bound and led away. The judge of the living and the dead willingly stood in the judgment hall of a petty ruler named Pilate. The feet that had once walked on water walked up the dusty trail of death to the summit of Golgotha.

Jesus—the crucified and living, the loving and forgiving—the Son of God, has suffered the hell that our betrayal deserved. *It is impossible for you to be more forgiven than you already are in Christ.* Turn to your sin and guilt? God forbid! That's a recipe for spiritual suicide. Turn to your Savior? God help you to do it every single day! And he will. St. Paul writes, "**If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself**" (2 Timothy 2:13). Turn to Jesus; never turn away! Turn to him. Always toward him. Never you; only him! Amen.