

**+ Matthew 27:1-5 + Repent: Turn to Jesus! Do Not Turn Away¹ +
+ Lenten Midweek #2 + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 8 March 2017 +**

As a father, I've come to realize that parenting can be a risky business. You pray for your children, yet they are not always the little angelic answers to your prayers. You try to raise them in the way of the Lord, yet sometimes they seem downright eager to forsake his way. You want them to know they are dearly loved children of their heavenly Father, yet sometimes they prefer the love of their earthly peers. We love our children, but that love is often painful.

As a pastor, I've also come to see the ministry as a risky business. You mine the Word as you prepare a sermon and seek to present it in a way that reaches hearts and lives, but then people fall asleep! You spend time instructing children in Confirmation Class or adults in Bible Information Class, but then, down the line, some lose the zeal they once had when they were confirmed. Some even seem to lose their desire to go 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!

How many of us have felt that pain of a loved one who has walked away and turned towards another path? How much pain, then, did Jesus feel that night in the Garden of Gethsemane when his friend Judas became his foe?

Jesus and Judas were not just friends. They shared a spiritual fellowship. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all point out that Jesus called Judas from Kerioth to be one of his twelve disciples. That meant Judas sat at Jesus' feet learning the Word and asking questions. That meant that at one point, Judas preached the Word, healed the sick, and drove out demons. After all, that's what Jesus commissioned his disciples to do. I think we can assume that Judas was a zealous disciple, an eager servant, and a faithful follower—all biblical pictures of Judas Iscariot, a man on a mission from Kerioth!

Yet there is still that most infamous picture of Judas, a man on a covert mission in Gethsemane. ***“While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, suddenly arrived. A large mob with swords and clubs was with him from the chief priests and elders of the people. His betrayer had given them a sign: ‘The one I kiss, he’s the one; arrest him.’ So immediately he went up to Jesus and said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed him. ‘Friend,’ Jesus asked him, ‘why have you come?’ Then they came up, took hold of Jesus, and arrested him.”*** (Matthew 26:47-50)

Judas went from driving out demons to betraying his Lord. How did that happen? It's not like Judas woke up one morning and said, “I'm going to betray the Son of God today.” Instead, Satan began to work on Judas' heart in a completely different way. Once Satan sticks his head through a crack in your heart's door, the rest of Satan and his minions soon follow!

Where did Judas take the wrong turn? The Bible sums it up in one word: greed. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that ***“the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”*** (1 Timothy 6:10) You could say Judas is the poster boy for loving money too much. As a result, he wandered away from the faith and turned away from Jesus.

Tragically, Judas had been warned. Jesus had taught that his treasure was in heaven where no moth or rust could knock the shine off that treasure. Jesus had warned that you can't serve both God and money. Jesus had taught that the deceitfulness of wealth can choke the Word right out of your heart. Judas may have even chuckled a little when Jesus painted that absurd picture of a camel being crammed through the eye of a needle, which is easier to do than for a rich man to enter heaven. In spite of everything that Jesus had taught Judas about money and the heart, Judas still turned away from Jesus by turning towards the shine of silver and the glitter of gold.

It was probably innocent enough at first as sin always is. Judas had the important job of keeping the disciples' treasury safe and in good order. Perhaps the trouble began by giving himself a “personal loan.” He would pay it back. Someday... Perhaps... We know that some women with significant means supported Jesus and his disciples. Cash was frequently passing through his hands. Opportunities to line his pockets came easy and often.

Eventually, Judas' greed surfaced openly when Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, gave Jesus an amazing gift. She poured precious perfume over his 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, the

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Apostle John knew the real motive. **“He didn’t say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it.”** (John 12:6)

Then came the ultimate opportunity for easy money. You see, his friendship with Jesus had connected him with Christ’s enemies—rich, powerful enemies willing to pay cold, hard cash for betrayal in the darkness. Note how deliberate Judas’ sins become! He **discussed** this “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 was even careful to cover his tracks with a **pre-arranged signal**—a kiss. Nothing like trying to save face with the other disciples while betraying Jesus to his face!

Judas got his money—30 pieces of silver, the price of a common slave. How that silver glittered in the torchlight! It felt cool and solid in his hand, but he paid dearly for this deal. **“When daybreak came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put him to death. After tying him up, they led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, was full of remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood,’ he said. ‘What’s that to us?’ they said. ‘See to it yourself!’ So he threw the silver into the temple and departed. Then he went and hanged himself.”** Judas got his money, but forfeited his soul to an eternity in hell.

Scripture doesn’t tell us Judas’ story so we can have pity on a dead man, but instead to avoid Judas’ dead end. Paul reminds us: **“Whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall.”** (1 Corinthians 10:12) Scripture is littered with examples of people who were once faithful Christians, yet eventually turned away from Jesus! Hell is bursting with people who were once faithful Christians, yet eventually turned away from Jesus! They turned away from God for foreign wives or another man’s wife. They turned away for money or because they trusted another gospel, which was really no gospel at all. They 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 can lead straight through the doors of the church.

“I would never fall away from Jesus!” I hope so. I pray that’s the truth, but there was a time when Judas likely thought those very same thoughts. You’ve never stolen a widow’s offering, but then again, you don’t always like hearing what the Bible says about money. You love to hear God’s Word, but then again, so did every member who has been released from church membership for consistently neglecting the Word and Sacrament. I would never think of betraying Jesus, but then again, how many outside the doors of this church even know I’m a Christian? I won’t betray him, but I’ll keep him secret!

...And what about greed? Society calls the relentless quest for earthly treasures “keeping up with the Joneses,” but is it really the Joneses we are keeping up with—or the Judases? Greed, unconfessed sin, premeditated sin, and putting Jesus on a shelf to put the world first is a toxic soup that can quickly turn you away from Jesus and turn you towards sin and unbelief!

That’s where Judas ended up—turning away from God to greed, from the Savior to silver, from disciple to unbeliever. What’s most tragic is that when Judas finally came to his senses after seeing Jesus led away like a lamb to the slaughter, he changed his mind. Tragically, instead of turning to Jesus for full and free forgiveness, he turned to his own guilty conscience and all the ugliness of his sin. Instead of turning to the Lord for mercy, he turned to the corrupt religious leaders 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. Sadly, Judas—in the grips of despair—grabbed for a noose instead of the lifeline of Christ’s mercy.

Dear friends, turn away from your sin and turn towards Jesus! Turn away from your guilt and turn towards 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. How can I turn to Jesus?”

Because of your sin, Jesus turns to you in love with every word he spoke and every deed he did. In the face of a mob, Jesus told them to let his disciples go. Jesus alone would endure the suffering and dying. As the betrayer kissed his face, Jesus called him **“Friend”** and urged him one last time to repent. 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 Golgatha.

Jesus—the crucified and living, the loving and forgiving Son of God—has suffered the hell that your betrayal deserves. It is impossible for you to be more forgiven than you already are in Christ. Turn to your sin and guilt? That's a recipe for spiritual suicide. Turn to your Savior? May our Lord Jesus enable you to do that every single day for even when we are faithless, he is always faithful! To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.