

March 8, 2017 Matthew 27:1-5

Parents come to realize that parenting can be a risky business. We try to raise children in the way of the Lord, yet sometimes they seem downright eager to forsake the Lord. We want them to know that they are dearly loved children of the heavenly Father, yet they can crave the love of their earthly peers far more. Love for our children often spells pain.

Pastors come to see the ministry as a risky business. You mine the Word to prepare a sermon and preach it well... and some sleep! I'll use the Bible to counsel in sinful situations. Sometimes I hear, *"I know you have to say that because you work for the church . . ."* We do a good job at training our youth in the faith through catechism. Statistically, one-quarter to one-third of them will not be attending church by Labor Day. It hurts a pastor's heart when it becomes obvious that some are in no hurry to get to heaven! **Repent: Turn to Jesus; Do Not Turn Away.**

Likely, each of us has felt the pain of a loved one who turned to another path. The pain must have been greater for Jesus that night in the Garden when his friend became his foe and a kiss meant death! Jesus and Judas shared a spiritual fellowship. Judas from Kerioth was called by Jesus to be one of the twelve disciples. Judas sat at Jesus' feet to learn from him. Can you picture Judas preaching the Word, cleansing lepers, healing the sick, and driving out demons; like Jesus sent his disciples. We assume Judas was a zealous disciple and eager servant to start with. These are biblical pictures of Judas Iscariot!

But there is that most infamous picture of Judas, a man on a covert 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). How did this change happen? Judas didn't wake up one morning and say, "Today's the day I'm going to betray the Son of God." Satan started on Judas' heart in a different way.

Where did Judas 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 Ti 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.

Part of the tragedy is that Judas had been warned. He knew that his treasure was in heaven and no moth or rust could remove its shine (Mt 6:19,20). He had been warned that a man could not serve both God and money (Mt 6:24). 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 (Mt 13:22). 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.

Probably innocent at first—sin always is. He had the important job of keeping the disciples' treasury. Perhaps the trouble began by writing himself a "personal loan." He would pay it back. Someday... Eventually, Judas' greed surfaced openly when Mary gave Jesus the precious gift of perfume poured upon Jesus' feet. Judas protested that this large gift could have been used to care for the poor! 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 were willing to pay for just one kiss in the darkness. Note how deliberate Judas' sins 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 careful to cover his tracks in the garden with the *pre-arranged signal*—a kiss, 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! 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.

“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. *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!* (1 Co 10:12). 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: some people walk straight through the doors of the church on the road to hell.

“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, greed leads us to dislike hearing what the Bible says about money. We love to hear the Lord’s Word, but then again, at one time 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, do the people outside the doors of church know I’m a Christian? I won’t betray him; I’ll keep him secret! And did I mention greed, the sin of Judas.

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. That’s where Judas ended up—turning away from God to greed, from the Savior to silver, from disciple to unbeliever.

In 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. Instead of turning to Jesus for full and free forgiveness, he turned to his guilty conscience and all of his sins’ ugliness. Instead of turning to the Lord for mercy, he turned to the corrupt priests in an effort to un-buy his betrayal. Returning the silver couldn’t make the mess of his 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 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?” English poet John Donne wrote *A Hymn to God the Father*:
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun A year or two, but wallow’d in a score?

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 Golgatha. Donne ended *A Hymn to God the Father*: And, having done that, thou hast done; I fear no more.

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? *If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself* (2 Ti 2:13).

Turn to Jesus; never turn away! Turn to him. Always toward him.