

April 9, 2017 – Palm / Passion Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 27:1-45

Potter's Field

In the end he didn't want the money, he didn't want to benefit from the betrayal of innocence, he didn't want any part of it, Judas didn't. After what he did, Judas repented, the gospel of Matthew tells us. At the very beginning of today's passion story it says so. This long gospel reading that we hear this last Sunday in Lent begins with repentance—just as we've been beginning with repentance all our other Sundays this season. All the Lenten Sundays leading up to this one have begun not with a parade, not with palms, not with songs of praise—but with repentance. All those other Sundays we've begun worship in here, calling to mind things we've done that we no longer want any part of: the words we've said, the self-advancement we've sought, the coins we've grabbed, our lack of confidence in who God is and what God is doing.

Just as we've been coming to church and starting with that, so today's account of the passion starts with that, with Judas repenting and going to the Temple. Judas directs his words to the religious leaders, but his words fall on deaf ears. The ones listening to Judas—or not listening to Judas, they didn't want his money, either. Those thirty pieces of silver, once an eye-widening amount, once a windfall acquired after merely a word and a kiss, is now unwanted, worthless, worse than worthless, a sum Judas cannot count: the price of going on, a cost he cannot bear. In despair, Judas goes out and hangs himself.

Meanwhile, the coins that he threw into the Temple have barely stopped rolling, slowly, across the sanctuary floor. They've just settled into the dust, disappeared into dark corners, wedged themselves into crevices, are now about as attractive as a scattering of grimy nickels, barely worth the effort of bending over to pick them up. But pick them up they did. It's not good to leave that kind of money lying around. Ill-gotten gains are made to disappear, cleared off the books, swiftly spent on other things—things no one will revisit, let alone visit. They take the unwanted money and buy a place for unwanted people, for foreigners. They buy a piece of land that belonged to a potter, to use as burial ground for people who have no known attachments. Even today, the term "Potter's Field," is the name used for cemeteries for the unknown or indigent. This is where that name comes from, from the passion story, from this part about Judas, from land bought with blood money. You need to spend it somehow, you need to put those people somewhere—those people no one wants, no one cares enough to claim. Like Judas.

Judas despairs, cannot bear the weight of shame. His story, his very name, become something from which we retract in horror. Even the gospel writers do it. Almost always, when his name comes up it says, it usually comes up with: "the one who betrayed Jesus."

I've often thought that seems to put an awful lot of weight on a peck on the cheek. That kiss, after all, is an identification of someone everyone knew. The people coming for Jesus already knew who Jesus was. After Judas kisses him, Jesus says so himself, "Hadn't they seen him, day after day, sitting in the temple teaching?" They knew who Jesus was, so why did they have to pay someone to say so? Why pin it all on Judas?

But we do, as evidenced by the fact that you would be hard pressed to meet a person named Judas, today. No one wants that name. And this also goes as far back as the Bible, where there does happen to be another person named Judas, but when that guy comes up, it's always

with a swift clarification, “not Judas Iscariot . . . not the one who betrayed Jesus.” That other Judas must have said that his whole life: “Not that one.”

We say that, too. “I’m not the one who said that.” “I’m not the one who did that.” I’m not that one.” Which one? The one who betrayed Jesus, who is God’s very image? We betray that image all the time. We fail to see that image, God’s image, in others. We treat some as less than, not worth our time, unwanted, foreign. And we do this, not just to others, but to ourselves. We fail to see God’s image in ourselves. We tell ourselves we’re no good, will not amount to anything, no one wants us. With others, with ourselves, we treat as worthless what God has named the very height of creation, what God has further graced in the incarnation. By becoming fully human, God underscores yet further our full and holy capacity—and we trade it for a trinket, a nickel’s worth of tin foil. How cheaply, how easily and often we do that, to our shame. How it wears us down, weighs on souls. I heard a story of a church that built a small, secluded chapel, a place to go for prayer and self-reflection. They put twelve chairs in it. Each chair had the name of one of the twelve disciples inscribed in it. The chair marked “Judas” is the one most heavily worn with use. We have all sat in that chair.

I also think of Judas when we are all standing, when the place where I am standing is behind the communion table. I also think of Judas when I say the words that Jesus said, “on the night in which he was betrayed.” When I say that I think about how on that night, when Jesus took the cup, and gave thanks, he gave it for all to drink. I think of how Judas was there. Judas was part of that “all.” And I think of Judas, too, when I repeat the words that Jesus said, how when Christ gave all the cup he made a promise, a promise so wide, all-enveloping, everlasting, a promise that is priceless. Jesus said, “This is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you, and for all people, for the forgiveness of sins.” That’s what God says. God listens to our repentant cries, God hears our despair. God hears us, all.

And he is hanged, God in Jesus is hanged from a cross, and he cries out with despair, and puts an end to blood money. Jesus bears the shame, bears the weight, bears the cost. In the cross, God claims all who are unwanted. In the cross, in communion, in the new covenant, God claims all, freely. We could not buy it. We can only receive it, saying “I would be like that one,” I would bear the name, “Christian.”