**Matthew 27:3-4** March 15, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Mid-week Lent #3

*Matthew 27:3When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins 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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“I Have Sinned”**

There is a custom among some Jews about a man named Haman. In the Old Testament, the book of Esther tells us how God protected his people from a brush with destruction. Haman was an influential “prince” in the Persian Empire. He harbored an intense hatred for the Jews, so he tried to carry out a genocide. He nearly succeeded! But God made sure he did not, through Esther. To this day, this tale of God’s care for his people, against their enemy Haman, is read every year in a great many Jewish households. And the custom is that as they read the story, whenever they hear the name of Haman (the enemy of God’s people), everyone breaks out in loud boos and hisses and shouts. In the end, Haman died an untimely and unpleasant death.

Over the centuries, Judas Iscariot has become something of a New Testament Haman—reviled. Judas, the man who betrayed Jesus, has been categorized *below* the worst of sinners. The fishermen had left their boats to become fishers of men, and Judas had left his career, whatever it might have been, to follow Jesus. Judas was so close to heaven. He broke bread with the Son of God. He heard Jesus speak for years on end. But in the end Judas had such contempt for Jesus that he put him on a cross for cold, hard cash. Judas was worse than an enemy, he was a traitor.

It brings up many questions: What changed this disciple of Jesus into a traitor? What was Judas’ motive in betraying Jesus? What did Judas hope would happen to Jesus? Did he even think about it? There are many questions. None of those questions get answered tonight. None of them get answered because, frankly, none of them are all that important.

Yet from the one who betrayed Jesus—even from him—we hear an involuntary sermon that we need to listen to. (Or maybe it is better to say it is a half-sermon.)

But sometimes that happens, doesn’t it? A person who doesn’t like us, and perhaps whom we don’t much care for, says something that hits home. We don’t really want to listen, but we know they have a point. The thing we want to do is consider the source and ignore those words—because what could a person like that ever say to us. But listen. Listen to Judas.

His words are these: ***“I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood.”***

No one can dispute that Judas sinned. Even if you are not a Christian, but merely listening to the life of Jesus in the Gospels, even an unbeliever will agree that Judas was a scoundrel. If you don’t like someone, just let them be! Leave them alone! But hand them over for execution? That is evil!

And so it is right that Judas should admit, ***“I have sinned!”*** This is a good thing – the ability to admit his wrong. This is so good that we reward it in our culture. We grant leniency to criminals who express remorse. Creditors ease the payments for debtors who are willing to work with them. The happiest husbands and wives are those who can admit their shortcomings and apologize to one another.

Judas’ sermon, ***“I have sinned”*** is an admission that he has done wrong. His accidental sermon is a good sermon. But what does it mean?

I am sure you were taught, as a child, to apologize for the wrongs you had done. That was wise and Christian advice, as far as it went. Perhaps you were also told to make things right when you had done wrong; for example, if you had stolen something, to repay it. That was wise and Christian advice, as far as it went. You were probably told to not repeat the wrongs you had done. That was wise and Christian advice, as far as it went.

While those are good pieces of advice – and I do not want to downplay them – none of those are the two most important pieces of advice. Judas gives us one of those most important pieces of advice. The first thing we must do about sin, the most important thing we can do is admit sin, ***“I have sinned.”*** We must accept that we have done what is wrong in the eyes of our God in heaven. “I have sinned,” is a realization that God the Law-giver has the right to punish me for what I have done.

Jesus said that he came, *“Not to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Mt 9:13). Jesus did not come for self-satisfied people who rush to tell him all the good things they have done for him. Jesus came for people who admit their sinfulness. For them he came!

God’s Word echoes with this truth. *“This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word”* said the Lord in Isaiah chapter 66 (v.2). Was not John the Baptist’s message, *“Repent”*? There can be no reconciliation with God as long as we hold on to our sin. Nor can there be reconciliation with God as long as we hide our sin. Nor when we try to pretend that our sin does not exist, nor when we make excuses for our sin. We must speak the same words that Judas spoke. ***“I have sinned.”***

Examine your life in thought, word and deed and you will find it. You will find the uncharitableness, the self-centeredness. And you will find more: anger and hatred, laziness and dereliction of duty as father, mother, child, teacher, soldier, pastor. Oh sure, other people, fellow sinners might give you a pass, but God’s law doesn’t. Just look around and be honest, and there will be plenty to confess.

Another important part of Judas’ sermon was ***“I have betrayed innocent blood.”*** Jesus’ innocence increased Judas’ guilt, and yet paradoxically, that innocence is what saves us. If Jesus had not been innocent, he could not be our Savior. His innocence, that which made Judas’ crime so horrendous, and our sins against him so detestable, that is the very thing that saves us.

Which is what reminds us that Judas’ sermon was only half of a sermon. Because when he went to confess his sin he identified the problem, but he never found the solution. Judas went to his co-conspirators: ***“‘I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood.’ ‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’”*** And when he heard those words, Judas went out and killed himself.

The second half of the sermon that Judas never spoke or thought is, *“I have sinned—Lord, have mercy on me.”* He never went to his Savior for forgiveness.

Judas is a “tragic” figure. We should not boo and hiss at him. A better response is to mourn over him. Judas has often been reviled for betraying Jesus, but what condemned Judas to hell was not his betrayal, but his unbelief of Jesus. You see, there is a place at the foot of the cross of Jesus for swindlers, murderers, blasphemers, violent people, and, yes, also for traitors. But not for unbelievers. Because an unbeliever, by definition, does not go to the cross of Christ. Against that unbelief we must be most vigilant. Let us be faithful with Word and Sacrament, coming to his house for both frequently. Let us be watchful in prayer. And let us be thankful to God for our forgiveness in Jesus. May we ever be willing to utter those words, “I have sinned!” while yet having hope in Jesus’ innocent blood. Amen.