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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, New York
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to hear it)
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PRAYER OF THE DAY: HOLY WEDNESDAY

☞ Almighty God, your Son our Savior suffered at human hands and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

HOLY GOSPELJohn 13:21-32, RSV

When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.²³One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; ²⁴so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, “Tell us who it is of whom he speaks.”²⁵So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, “Lord, who is it?”²⁶Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.²⁷Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.”²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast”; or, that he should give something to the poor.³⁰So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night.

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; ³²if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.”

[Introduction to the hymn: In a way, the most important pastoral point we will make this evening is the hymn we now sing, LBW 476, “Have No Fear, Little Flock.” The reason this hymn seems so important to me is that the great tragedy of Judas was despair. The man gave up hope. If only Judas could have remembered the true nature of Jesus and how ready Jesus is to forgive the repentant sinner, then Judas could have returned to Jesus, as Peter did. How do I know this? Because when did Jesus ever turn anyone away? “...him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37, KJV). Why, there could have been rejoicing in heaven over Judas if had been a repentant sinner. Instead, Judas despaired and hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). Never despair, my friends.]

SERMON

In the name of the Father and the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In these midweek Lent sessions, we have been taking a look at the 1999 ecumenical statement called “Joint Declaration on Justification.” It is a substantial step forward in mending the sixteenth century breach of the church.

This evening we conclude our glance at the JD by speaking of “sin’s enslaving power.” That is a phrase from paragraph 22 in the JD. You will find that paragraph in this evening’s worship folder insert. Together, Catholics and Lutherans affirm that paragraph. It starts off this way:

We confess together that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from *sin’s enslaving power* and imparts the gift of new life in Christ.

That phrase, “sin’s enslaving power,” is similar to the start of our confession service. In fact, we repeated the idea just this evening, just a few minutes ago:

Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

Stark words, but not dreadful words. They are not dreadful because of that final clause, “and cannot free ourselves.” This is true. We are not capable of freeing ourselves from sin’s enslaving power. But Jesus is! His Holy Spirit is! Our Triune God is well able to free us from bondage to sin. This is what the Lutherans and Catholics agree on and hasten to say to us: Sin tempts us, until our dying day. But we are continually free to turn it down. We are free to escape sin’s prison. We can skip away from any sin.

So, now let’s turn to Judas. He is infamous for his sin of betrayal. Let’s look at his story.¹

It seems to me that much of the story and mystery of Judas can be summarized in three verses of scripture:

Here they are:

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” (John 12:4-5)

¹ From this point on, I am relying on my sermon from twenty years ago.

The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.”(Matt 26:24 RSV)

This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it.(John 12:6)

The first two of these verses suggest fate and pre-destination and inescapable determination to sin. The third verse speaks of nothing so mysterious as fate, but rather of old-fashioned greed for money.

Let’s begin with that sad parenthesis about Judas -- the one that says “he who was to betray him.” As a matter of grammar, let us note that this clause does not necessarily speak of fate. It may simply be pointing to the one who later in the story did in fact betray our Lord, but who was also free not to do so. That is, the words “he who was to betray” do not imply necessity of betrayal, but simply identify the one who did betray. It would be the same in anybody’s story -- not just the story of Judas. Thus, we could refer to young Abraham Lincoln in a log-throwing context, and go ahead and specify the lad we mean by saying, “Yes, the one who was to become President someday.” In fact, we could say the same thing about you or me. “Yes, the one who grew up and became an attorney in New York City or a preacher at Immanuel Lutheran Church.” It does not mean that we were inescapably destined for such roles. It is just that that is in fact how we lived our lives. And so it is with Judas. When the New Testament refers to Judas as the one “who was to betray Jesus,” it need not mean that Judas HAD to betray our Lord, but simply that the Betrayer is the one the text has in mind -- and not, say, Judas, the son of James. (Rf. Luke 6:16)

And yet we might wonder, “If Christ predicted his passion, as surely he did... and if he predicted that he would suffer and die, then it must be by the hands of *someone*, and it certainly looks as if that *someone* was bound to be Judas, else the work of human salvation would be impeded.” Not so! For if Judas had repented and turned away from the sin he contemplated, then our God, who is wise and endlessly rich in contrivance, could have found another way for our salvation.¹ His fair skill is fully able to take the wickedness of Judas and bring forth beautiful salvation from it, yet that by no means excuses Judas or forces his hand.

Let me give you an example from the times of Martin Luther. I refer to the awful murder of Rev. George Winkler, the pastor of the congregation in Halle in the year 1527. The matter was never proved, but there was a strong suspicion among the Lutherans that young Pastor George had been murdered at the command of high church officials because the young minister dared to

administer the holy sacrament in what is called “two kinds.” That is, he dared to distribute both the Eucharistic bread and wine, whereas the medieval custom had been to distribute the bread but to reserve the wine for the clergy.

So, it is a sordid story, and Luther was very angry about the murder. But in his *Letter of Consolation to the Christians in Halle* (LW 43), Luther raises the interesting point that the murderers had done Pastor George no harm, but had rather benefited him. Luther says this:

Though these miserable creatures [the murderers] thought at that moment that they had Pastor George entirely in their power and could do with him as they pleased, actually it is just the opposite. At that very moment they were his most useful servants, unknowingly and unintentionally, since, by the gracious and fatherly dispensation of God and because of the devil’s raging hatred, they have helped this good man escape from all the dangers I have just mentioned. Although I cannot praise their crime or the devil’s malice, still one must perceive in their crime the boundless grace and goodness of our merciful Father and glorify him that he can so wonderfully employ the malice of the devil and the wickedness of his companions for the welfare of his elect and to the destruction of the devil and all who belong to him.(p. 161)

It is the same with Judas. While it is true that the grace of God can overcome human wickedness, it is still the case that Judas is a miserable creature, who is responsible for his betrayal, and we can never defend his crime. That is not to say that Judas’s crime was so bad that it somehow put him beyond the hope of forgiveness. It is rather to say something glorious about Judas and about us! God has made us free and called us to freedom from sin. And we should never, ever suppose that some particular wickedness is inescapable for us. It does not matter if a prophet or an angel himself were to say of us that we will end up committing such and such a crime, we are free to go through each day innocent of that crime, until at last we skip our way all the way into heaven!

But if you would press the case for Judas even further, the answers of St. John Chrysostom are too good to miss. I quote him, updating the language just a little:

But someone will say again, “and if it had been good if he had never been born, wherefore did [God] suffer both this man and all the wicked, to come into the world?”

to which the saint gives this answer:

[Shame on you!] When you ought to blame the wicked, for that having the power not to become such as they are, they have become wicked, you leave this, and busy yourself and are curious about the things of God; although knowing that it is not by necessity that any one is wicked.

But the critic then continues:

“But the good only should be born,” he would say, “and there were no need of hell, nor punishment, nor vengeance, nor trace of vice, but the wicked should either not be born at all, or being born should straightway depart.”

To which Chrysostom gives this reply:

First, then, it were well to repeat to you the saying of the apostle, “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why hast Thou made me thus?”(Rom 9:20)

In this debate, it is Chrysostom who points the way of health. He will never excuse the wicked by denying them freedom to be good. Genetic background, limitations of knowledge, and family upbringing are all relevant to who we are, but to the degree that we are human at all, we are free to choose this day to serve God and not sin. It is a theme worth rejoicing in. It is an assertion of human freedom.

Well, then, if Judas was not compelled to betray Jesus, why did he? There is no mystery here. He did it for greed. He made himself a “pest to the world” through his inordinate love of money. As St. John puts it, Judas protested about the cost of the ointment “not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief.”

This should serve as an important warning to us, lest we imagine that love of money has no power over us. Judas had had the close company of Jesus. He had heard the preaching from the Master himself about simplicity of life and the lure of mammon. If *this one* could fall into sin because of love of money then we dare not nurse the love of money in our own lives, lest we too fall.

To review, Judas was free as a bird to fly away from his betrayal, but he was careless and succumbed to greed, with the terrible result that he betrayed our Lord and lives in infamy ever since.

But to complete this evening’s reflections on Judas, let me speak and praise another kind of freedom. I speak of the freedom of Christ. His arm is not shortened. We should not conclude that the treachery of Judas was beyond

forgiveness. He should have hung in there. He should not have despaired of our Lord's readiness to forgive. Oh, unhappy Judas! At the Last Supper, Jesus tries to woo him back. He does not even exclude him from the Supper, but rather gives and interprets his body and blood as being for Judas as well as for the rest. Leo the Great from the 5th Century phrases an appeal:

Oh, Judas, return to your right mind; lay aside your madness and be wise. Mercy invites you. Salvation knocks at the door. Life recalls you to life.²

But Judas despaired. He supposed that he had so ruined his life that it was beyond repair. And there his story must end for now, until the great and awesome day when we discover the true heights and depths of God's wisdom and love through Jesus Christ our Lord to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

¹ Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Volume 10, pages 486-87.

² NPNF, Second Series, Vol. 12, page 169.