PRAYER OF THE DAY (Holy Week)
Almighty God, you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take our flesh upon him and to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we may share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

HOLY GOSPEL............................................................Matthew 26:45-50, KJV
Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me. 47And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. 48Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. 49And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. 50And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

And, sorry to say, there is no reason to think that Judas has repented of his covetousness by the time of this evening’s story. Indeed, the love of money is a very hard habit to break. And so early on in this evening’s story, from the Twenty-sixth Chapter of St. Matthew, we read of the machinations of Judas:

14Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. 16And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him. (Matthew 26:14-16, RSV)

Treachery is afoot, then. Judas is with his brother disciples and he is with Jesus, but he is there for mischief, yea, for terrible sin.

Throughout this midweek Lent series, we have been speaking of the “touch of Jesus.” His touch has been a compassionate, saving, and life-giving touch. Last week, we reversed the momentum of
the touch and pondered with sorrow the cruel touch
of the guards as they so roughly handled and
mocked Jesus.

Now, we return to the gentle touch of Jesus. In
all his dealings with Judas, Jesus is steadily gentle.
He washes the feet of Judas, including him in the
apostolic company. He shares his Last Supper with
Judas, declaring to him that the sacrifice of his
body and his blood are meant for Judas, and for the
others as well, for the forgiveness of sin.

And now, in this terrible scene near the end of
our Lord’s life, Jesus again deals gently with Judas.
In fact, his touch is so light and warm it is a
wonder that Judas, though he had been an iceberg,
had not melted and repented before that touch. The
touch of which I speak is a mere breath — a breath
carrying the word “friend”:

50And Jesus said unto him, Friend,
wherefore art thou come?

Well, Judas has come for betrayal! But
methinks Judas must have spun himself into some
trance, some spell, in which he could no longer
hear, nor hardly even see what was going on
around him. When Jesus called him friend, did he
not have that one last chance to repent? It was too
late in the sense that he had already led the soldiers
there to Jesus, and yet Judas could have spared
Jesus however possible. He could have declined to
kiss Jesus, thereby failing to signal the victim. He
could have declared to the guards that he was
wrong, that Jesus was not there. And if worse came
to worse, Judas could have confessed to Jesus what
he had done and then taken his place at the side of
Jesus, saying to the soldiers, If you arrest Jesus,
you must arrest me too.

But Judas does none of these things. Instead,
he doggedly follows through on his plan and he
betrays his Lord with a kiss.

In the total scale of human wickedness, Judas
seems not to have been an awful man. He had
preached and healed along with the other disciples,
and there is no report that he failed at it. There
must have been some nobility of soul about him
because, like the other disciples, he had left home
and kin and had hit the road following a poor man
who preached of God’s kingdom. Certainly the
man had a conscience, for he was so conscience-
stricken after his betrayal of Jesus that he ended up
killing himself. And, as preachers of old have
noted, his overall reputation must have been good
enough that when Jesus announced at the Last
Supper that “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you
will betray me” (John 13:21), eleven heads did not
swivel and turn toward Judas, and no one shouted
out, “It is Judas, Lord? Is it Judas?”

There is a warning for us here in this
moderation of sin in Judas. The apostle Paul
phrases the warning thus:

Therefore let any one who thinks that he
stands take heed lest he fall.(1
Corinthians 10:12, RSV)

Judas stood for a good long while. But then he fell.
Beware ofcovetousness. It can bring down even
one of the Twelve.

And what of the fate of Judas? The one firm
theological principle that we can rely on is that
Judas is in the eternal hands of the One he
betrayed. And that sounds both dangerous and
hopeful to me.

I think we can agree on this: When the end
comes for you or for me, it will be better to be
found in prayer than in betrayal. There is a recent
case on my heart which moves me to this simple
lesson. This past Sunday, just a few days ago, my
wife Carol spent the afternoon comforting the
family and friends of a dear member of the staff at
The Wartburg, where Carol is chaplain. This
woman was in her fifties. She arrived at work,
turned to a friend and said, “I do not feel well. I
think I am going to die.” What did she do? She sat
down and prayed, and while doing so, she died. It
was stunning and sorrowful, but what a good way
to be found in when Jesus summons us home: to be
found in prayer.

We know not when we will fall. We know that
we will fall into the hands of Jesus, and that is
good whatever he decides. Yet, all things
considered, let’s strive always to be found in prayer
and not in the various forms of betrayal of Jesus
available to us. For to Jesus, along with the Father
and the Holy Spirit, we owe not betrayal, but our
love and devotion. Amen.