

“Words of Grace”  
March 31, 2019

Matthew 27:3-10

When I first conceived this sermon in my mind a few weeks ago, I had no inkling how timely today’s theme and Scripture lesson might be. Yet, over the course of seven recent days, we have heard and read about three high profile people who took their own lives. Two students who survived the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, just over a year ago and one father, whose daughter was killed in the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012.

Over the course of those seven recent days, there were undoubtedly others across this country that chose to take their own lives in cases far less publicized than the three I just mentioned. In the year 2017, the United States averaged one hundred and twenty-nine deaths by suicide daily. Whether these tragic deaths are caused by trauma, depression, drug or alcohol abuse or some other reason, the fact remains that we need to do better with intervention in this country. Not just parents and families and schools and medical professionals and mental health counselors and first responders. But also churches...places like this one where we reach out to people in crisis and look out for one another in community and lift up the value of hope and proclaim the sacredness of life for people of all ages...churches have a crucial role to play...

Shifting attention to today’s Scripture lesson, I don’t know how many of you have ever focused on the play by play of Judas’ final hours. In a previous chapter in Matthew, during the last supper he shared with his disciples, Jesus identified Judas as the one who would betray him. Not long thereafter, Judas bore out that prediction by betraying Jesus with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. Subsequently, in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, Judas Iscariot is never heard from again. He disappears offstage in ignominy and disgrace, relegated forever to the shadowy pages of history.

Only in the Gospel of Matthew this morning do we hear the conclusion to Judas’ story. Wracked by guilt and self-doubt, Judas went from the Garden of Gethsemane back to the temple with his thirty silver coins. By returning his payment to the priests, Judas figured he could soothe his conscience, at least a little bit. When the chief priests refused to take back what they referred to as “blood money,” however, Judas had no choice left. He could not keep the money for himself and he could not give the money back to its source. So he threw the silver pieces down at the feet of the priests and watched them scatter across the temple floor.

What happens next in the story is reported by the Gospel writer matter of factly and unceremoniously. “Judas went out and hanged himself.” The rest of the details are left to the imagination. The anguish on his face and the amount of despair Judas must have felt. The inner shame and self-loathing that was clearly eating away at Judas. The sense of wild-eyed desperation he felt when he walked out the temple doors empty handed. The abject loneliness and overwhelming sadness that drove Judas to a nearby field. The utter hopelessness that compelled him to put a rope around his neck. And the fateful moment from which there would be no turning back...

Down through the generations, neither public opinion nor the written record has been kind to Judas. He is viewed as one of history's worst traitors. The personification of all that is perceived to be evil in the hearts and souls of human beings, many have argued that in the end, Judas got precisely what he deserved. A death every bit as inglorious as his life.

But was what Judas did so unforgivable? How is it, for example, that Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus once and went on to be filled with remorse, became the villain? While Peter, who denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed, and then wept bitterly about it, became the rock upon which the church was built? What is the big difference between Judas and Peter? In truth, maybe there's isn't a whole lot of difference. And maybe there's not a whole lot of difference between us and these two men either.

Still there is one vitally important thing Peter experienced that Judas never did. Ironically, it's the very thing that could have made all the difference. In spite of his lack of courage in standing up for Jesus when it really mattered, Peter was welcomed back into the fold by Jesus and his brother disciples. So much so that Peter was out fishing when the resurrected Jesus appeared on the shore. Peter shared a post-Easter fish breakfast with Jesus in the sand. And a short time later, Peter heard the love of Jesus when Jesus instructed Peter to feed his lambs and tend his sheep after he ascended to heaven.

Meanwhile, in his moment of torment and despair, as he was leaving the temple and heading out to that desolate field, Judas was on his own. As a result, Judas never availed himself of any means of reconciliation. Judas walked into that field without experiencing God's grace because he was removed from any community or any person who might have shared God's grace with him.

Judas never heard a word of grace. And the truth is that people who are desperate and fragile and lonely and consumed by their own guilt and self-doubt cannot manufacture for themselves the kind of beautiful, radical grace that flows from God's heart and touches God's broken people...

As human beings, you and I can create for ourselves all kinds of amazing things. We can create entertainment for ourselves. We can create stories about ourselves, both true and untrue. We can create pain for ourselves and concoct remedies that will help relieve some of that pain. We can even give ourselves pep talks to make ourselves feel better. But you and I cannot create a word of grace from God.

That word of grace needs to come from another person. Don't get me wrong, if we could hear a grace-filled word from God through our own prayers and quiet devotions, the Christian faith would be a lot easier to practice. But grace is something we hear. And in order to hear a word of grace, someone has to be there to speak a word of grace.

Someone has to remind us of the love of God which surpasses all human understanding. Sometimes a person shares God's grace with us in response to a confession or an apology. And sometimes, God's grace comes through simple, imperfect, everyday human compassion and tenderness...

Even after he sold out his beloved friend for thirty lousy pieces of silver. Even when he made a decision that ran against everything Jesus had ever taught him in terms of core morals and values. Even after his colossal lapse in judgement, whether it was planned out for a long time or spur of the moment. Even after all those things, nobody said to Judas, “you are a child of God and God loves you more than you know. In a community of faithful people, every one of us has the authority and the duty and the right to say exactly those words to a fragile sister or a vulnerable brother.

How would the Gospel story or the story of the early Christian community be different if Judas had received forgiveness? What if Judas was not all that different from the rest of those early Christians who heard Jesus say time and again that they should preach and teach forgiveness in his name? And they practiced forgiveness as a result of it.

I’m not saying the first part of the story would have changed. Perhaps Judas was destined to betray Jesus. Maybe Judas set in motion a process that would not have happened had he not been the catalyst. But as his story ends, is it possible that Judas chose his own death too soon? Before he opened himself to the redemptive power of God’s grace. Before his community could seek him out and share God’s grace with him.

It’s conceivable that for the other disciples it was simply too painful for them to extend God’s grace to Judas. Sometimes it’s easier to single out someone as the problem and to scapegoat them to insure the comfort and well-being of the rest of the group. Maybe Judas’s community intentionally ignored him...I’m not exactly sure.

There is one thing I am sure about though, and Judas helps me understand. We can’t keep quiet. If someone we know in our lives is desperate. If someone we know is lonely and isolated. If we know a person who is filled with shame or self-doubt. If we can see the anguish on someone’s face. If we can hear the hopeless tone in someone’s voice. You and I have to open our mouths and speak. You and I have to intervene by giving voice to God’s grace before the fateful moment arrives and there is no turning back.

We have to speak with a voice that says, “God loves you and I love you. Your life is worth living. I believe in you. You are a part of the family. You are my friend. You belong to this community. I will not let you go. You are forgiven.”

People cannot manufacture words of God’s grace on their own. They need to hear that assurance from someone else. Be one who speaks then. A reminder that God’s grace is available to all of us. Amen.

