

3-4-12

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. The text is from the Gospel Lesson, Mt 26:46-50a In Gethsemane, Jesus said to His disciples, 46] LOOK, MY BETRAYER IS ALMOST HERE. 47] WHILE HE WAS STILL SPEAKING, LISTEN, JUDAS, ONE OF THE TWELVE, CAME WITH A HUGE CROWD WITH SWORDS AND CLUBS FROM THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND ELDERS OF THE NATION. 48] NOW, THE TRAITOR HAD GIVEN THEM A SIGNAL. "THE ONE I KISS," HE'D SAID, "IS THE ONE. GRAB HIM!" 49] HE HURRIED UP TO JESUS AND SAID, "HELLO, MASTER!" AND KISSED HIM. 50] BUT JESUS SAID TO HIM, "FRIEND, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to be crucified, but at least he didn't kiss Him first. Judas did. It seems impossible. I don't mean impossible that he'd sell Christ for money. Tons of people have turned from Heaven to go for extra income instead. And then they're in Hell, like JUDAS, and how much did they get paid to go there? Not enough.

I say, lots of people have sold Christ for money. What seems impossible is that *JUDAS* would. He was so close to Jesus. He was V. 47] ONE OF THE *TWELVE*. *JUDAS* cast out demons and healed the sick and preached the Gospel. He was the Apostle St. Judas. He was supposed to sit enthroned with Christ in Paradise. How could he be so close and yet so far?

The longest journey begins with a single step. Just don't repent. See, in order not to repent, you've got to harden your heart step by step. Hard don't grieve or believe; they just leave, step by step. Jesus doesn't move. He said, I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU. But it's amazing how lost we can get if we just keep taking small steps, and don't repent, till we're putting up with sins that would've made us really uncomfortable once. Say, at first, you just skip church, just for this week, which, okay, is *not* really a small step – skipping church means telling Christ, "No." It means telling Him that He's wrong about what I need; it means telling my Savior, "Another time." But it can *feel* like a small step, if we harden our hearts to it and don't repent, but do it again, now and then, step by step. Or it can be any of the sins we step into - and we do - any of our little betrayals.

With *JUDAS*, it started with petty theft. Jesus and the Apostles had a cash box for the donations they lived on. St. Judas the Apostle was their treasurer and he just started TO HELP HIMSELF TO WHAT WAS IN THE CASH BOX. Maybe at first

he hardened himself against repenting by telling himself he was just borrowing. But you know how it is with sin: If we get into it far enough, step by step it starts to feel okay, or at least, like, just, you know, what we do. Two days before Gethsemane, Mary of Bethany poured out that expensive perfume on Jesus. And Judas said, "WHAT A WASTE! IT COULD HAVE BEEN SOLD AND GIVEN TO THE POOR. It could have been sold and put in our cash box, and there'd have been all that cash in the cash box – you know, for the *poor*." Step by step he hardened himself from a petty thief to a total hypocrite. Pity him.

Notice that whatever JUDAS stole, he couldn't spend without exposing himself. They lived together. So what was he doing? Putting it aside? For what? To have a stash to fall back on in case Jesus didn't turn out to be everything JUDAS *used* to think He was? At first, we all think Jesus is just *everything*. JUDAS used to think He was everything, till petty sin *unrepented* hardened his heart and numbed his brain.

None of us can fall as far as JUDAS fell, if for no other reason than that none of us starts as high as he did. But God save us from small steps. God save us from hardening our hearts with little deals we make with ourselves, from little stashes of sin, never really repented of, till we can smile and pass for fine, when the *truth* is, it's hard to remember what the *truth* was like once, because Jesus doesn't feel so much like the be-all and end-all, because we're hardening and falling away. Jesus talks about PEOPLE who COME NEAR ME WITH THEIR MOUTHS, BUT THEIR HEARTS ARE FAR FROM ME.

Till maybe we tell ourselves that we're still following Jesus, but finally, everybody goes after what they're really after.

JUDAS went after the money. When Mary wasted that money on Jesus, and then Jesus said she did it for His *burial*, that was *it* for JUDAS. If Jesus was dead set on dying, well, there had to be a profit in there somewhere. So JUDAS, one of the Apostles, WENT TO THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND ASKED THEM: "WHAT'LL YOU GIVE ME IF I HAND HIM OVER TO YOU?" Please pity JUDAS. There was a time when JUDAS would never have believed that things would get that far.

That was Tuesday night. On Thursday night, he went to the Last Supper with a smile. But Jesus knew it all when He got that BASIN OF WATER AND the TOWEL and got down on His knees in front of JUDAS to wash JUDAS' feet, and held JUDAS' feet in His hands. Jesus loved him. Why didn't Judas *break*? He could have repented *then*. He could have looked down at his Lord, on His *knees* in front of him, and said,

“Lord, You don’t *know* what You’d have to wash off *me*.” Jesus would’ve said, “But I *do* know. And I’m right here.” And the crucifixion of God pays for anything.

A couple of minutes later, it says, Jesus was really torn up and He said, ONE OF YOU IS GOING TO BETRAY ME – which should have cut JUDAS open but he - pity him - he just acted shocked and he said, “SURELY, IT’S NOT ME, LORD, IS IT?” Christ told him, “YES.” It means, “JUDAS, I know.” Jesus loved him. And JUDAS could have, should have *broken* then, and Christ would have rocked him in His arms. But JUDAS just hardened himself and went off to meet his new friends. The others thought he’d maybe gone to buy something for the supper – though it was awfully late to do that. And then he wasn’t *back* for the supper and he wasn’t back *yet* when Jesus led the rest of them off to pray.

It says, JUDAS KNEW GETHSEMANE, because - listen - *they all used to be together there* a lot and so JUDAS told his new friends, “I know where He’ll go.” Pity him. And it gets even worse. If we just avoid repenting, it’s *amazing* how much worse we can get, step by step, until V. 48] THE TRAITOR gave THEM A SIGNAL. It was *his* idea: He said, “THE ONE I KISS IS THE ONE.”

While under the trees in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed on and on, and the disciples slept on and off. And then there’s torchlight under the trees a way off and Jesus said, V. 46] “LOOK: MY BETRAYER’S ALMOST HERE. And what kind of shock was it to the other disciples, to see JUDAS, V. 47] ONE OF THE *TWELVE*, coming WITH the CROWD and the CLUBS and the knives?

But before JUDAS had a chance to give his SIGNAL, JESUS, as if He were saving JUDAS from doing that - JESUS STEPPED FORWARD HIMSELF AND SAID, “I’M THE ONE YOU WANT.” So they didn’t *need* JUDAS’ SIGNAL. He didn’t have to do it, but V. 49] HE HURRIED UP TO JESUS anyway, because he didn’t want to lose his fee. HE HURRIED UP for the money the few last steps AND he SAID, “HELLO, MASTER!” although JUDAS had a new master by that time. Pity him. He said, “HELLO, MASTER!” as if Christ didn’t *know*. As if everybody *there* didn’t know by then. He said, “HELLO, MASTER!” And then he KISSED HIM. Jesus said, JUDAS, YOU BETRAY Me WITH A *KISS*? But he did. JUDAS came NEAR Him WITH his MOUTH and KISSED HIM, so close and yet by that time, JUDAS was very nearly a thing.

*But Jesus loved him.* And JESUS SAID TO HIM, V. 50] “FRIEND, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” JESUS SAID, “FRIEND.” It means, “I remember you.

Do *you* remember you?" He said, FRIEND, WHAT ARE YOU DOING with those people? FRIEND, WHAT ARE YOU DOING on the edge of Hell? JUDAS! WHERE ARE *YOU*? JUDAS could've been St. Judas, saved on the edge of the Void. But JUDAS decided that it was too late for all that, too late to repent. JUDAS hardened his heart and, *finally*, all he could see was how far he'd fallen and not how much he was loved. So he called that love a lie and killed himself, just as his *new* MASTER wanted, and took the last step into Hell.

Guys, whatever wrong step we take, we can retrace it; we can repent. Somebody who loves us says, SEE TO IT THAT NONE OF YOU HAS A SINFUL, UNBELIEVING HEART THAT TURNS AWAY, SO THAT NONE OF YOU WILL BE HARDENED BY SIN'S DECEITFULNESS. Somebody who loves us says, TODAY, IF YOU HEAR My VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS. For WE HAVE COME TO SHARE IN CHRIST IF WE HOLD FAST THE CONFIDENCE WE HAD AT FIRST, the CONFIDENCE that He *is* the be-all and end-all, the CONFIDENCE that He will NEVER LEAVE, the CONFIDENCE that it's not too late, the CONFIDENCE that Calvary covers it all, the CONFIDENCE that He still loves me.

Jesus, save us from our little betrayals. Jesus, save us from coming NEAR WITH our MOUTHS WHILE OUR HEARTS ARE FAR FROM You. Save us from hardening ourselves. It's amazing how far away small steps can take us. *But Christ hasn't moved.* Whatever we've done, whatever we've failed to do, He says, "I know." If we're one step away or a thousand, Jesus says, FRIEND, WHAT ARE YOU DOING there?" He says, FRIEND, as if you'd never drifted, as if all of that could be covered and erased – it can: Look at His scars. Remember this. When we take any wrong step this week, this month, or next year: Jesus says, REPENT, which means, "Turn around. I'm right here." And a tender heart can hurt, but it's alive, thank God.

Guys, let us break and start new. What JUDAS *could* have known, we still *can*: I mean, that wherever we've gotten to, it's not being found *out*. It's being *found*. Amen.