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April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday

**“The Most Painful Word”**  
Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-50

The first two weeks of this month of April are very significant, and unique. First and foremost, of course, this time period is most important because we celebrate Holy Week. That 8-day period like no other in recorded history, in which the very Son of God went from cheers to jeers... triumph to trials... praise to persecution... vehemence to victory... death to life.

In accordance with that ‘one solitary life’ like no other, these two weeks are unique in the frequency with which we will be celebrating that Sacrament most associated with His unconditional love and sacrifice... NO, not baptism. ☺ The Lord’s Supper. In 15 days we will have shared in bread and cup on three different occasions: last Sunday, this coming Maundy Thursday, and Resurrection (Easter) Sunday. At each one of these observances, you will have heard those familiar ‘Words of Institution’...those words that remind us of the mystery and majesty of that holy moment in time when Jesus ‘took bread’... ‘gave thanks’... ‘broke it’... ‘gave to His disciples’... saying ‘this is my body, broken for you.’ AND, that he also ‘took a cup,’ calling it the ‘cup of the new covenant.’ That ‘cup’ is representative of his ‘blood’... ‘shed for the forgiveness of sins.’ All of this we do in response to Jesus’ command: “...*in remembrance of me.*”

At the very beginning of those Words of Institution, you may recall that there is a phrase that I always say. Words that place that event into a historical context. “*On the night... that He was betrayed...*” Now while I am very particular about using this introductory phrase, I don’t know that every minister does so. I think that reluctance to do so might be because of the very last word: ‘betrayed.’

“Betray.” Perhaps the six most difficult letters in the English language to hear and ponder... perhaps only exceeded by a four-letter one... ‘h-a-t-e.’ To ‘betray’ means “to **lead astray**; to act in **treachery**; to **fail someone** in a **time of need**; to **break a confidence.**” I believe that it is a whole lot easier for us to hear most 4-letter words... including that one ‘hate’... than it is to think of the word ‘betray.’ Anyone who has been ‘failed in a time of need’ by someone

you thought to be a friend... anyone who has had their 'confidence broken' by a spouse, or close family member... knows that this word 'betray' is, in truth, a 'curse word.' A word whose pain cuts much deeper than any 'two-edged sword.'

It is because of that very 'cursed,' **painful** nature of this word that it is so hard to read it again and again in this 26<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew. **Seven** times, to be exact. It can be so easy for us to denigrate Judas, to put him down, to ask in puzzlement, '*HOW could he DO such a thing?! HOW could such a close friend and follower of the very Son of God act so **treacherously**?*' Well, as we ponder the answer to these questions over the course of these passages from Scripture, we will see that Judas is in truth no different than any of us. That in in going from the heights of that Triumphal Entry to the betrayal of a kiss on the cheek, we will consider how what Judas did... and indeed, we ALL do... is, to GOD, '**the most painful word.**'

In the first of the three 'vignettes' with Judas, he goes to the chief priests to determine what they will pay for his betrayal. And of course, the price they offer is '30 pieces of silver.' (probably equal to approx. 4 mos. wages). Ever wonder the significance of this amount? Going back to Moses' time (**Exodus 21:32**), if a servant lost his life by being gored by a bull, the 'going rate' for that servant was 30 shekels of silver. Hmm. A **servant**. Being **killed** in a very harsh, **brutal manner**. Sound familiar?

The thought of ANY human life, however, being reduced to such monetary value is pretty **repulsive** to our 21<sup>st</sup> C. sensibilities. HOW could one equate the worth of Jesus to mere 'dollars and cents?' AND YET... do we ourselves not weigh the 'cost' of spending time with our Lord... in worship, in study, in prayer, in ministry and outreach... with how that valuable commodity might be 'spent' in other pursuits? ('TIME IS MONEY!') Can we not 'sell short' our relationship with God because of those 4 terrible words: '*I don't have time*'? Like those disciples that would fall asleep while Jesus anguished in the Garden of Gethsemane, can we too not 'betray' our Lord by 'failing him in times of need?'

Disturbing thoughts? Well, they should be. And they sure were to those disciples gathered with Jesus in the Upper Room in the second locale. When he said that one of them would betray Him, it says that "**they became greatly distressed, and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?"**" (Mt. 26:22) And do you remember how Jesus answered?

***“The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl will betray me.”*** (Mt. 26:33) Was Judas the ONLY one to ‘dip his hand into the bowl?’ I think NOT! They ALL did. They all, in their own ways, would let him down. BUT only Judas would try to cover it up. ***“Surely not I, Lord?”*** Is he trying to FOOL Jesus?! If so, JUDAS was the fool! Thinking that he could HIDE from the Lord! And the words were no more out of his mouth before Jesus would look him in the eye and say, ***“You have said so.”*** ‘Said so’ with his lips? Or, with his heart?

We too ‘dip our hands into the bowl’ with Jesus. Like, a ‘baptismal’ bowl? We too should become ‘greatly distressed’ at the ways we can **fail** Him, turn away from Him. But NEVER deceive ourselves that we can HIDE from Jesus. For He too looks into our face, and knows exactly what we are saying... not merely with our **lips**... but with our **hearts**...

Which brings me to this question: WHAT WAS IT THAT CAUSED JUDAS TO TURN ON JESUS? Was he in some way disappointed in the manner of ‘king’ that Jesus was becoming, ruling from a position of LOVE rather than of POWER? Did something go sour in Judas’ relationship with the other disciples that made him take it out on their beloved leader? Could there have been something that Jesus did or said that made Judas himself feel ‘betrayed’... and therefore, in turn, feel driven to betray his leader and friend?

Which brings me to the most tragic, harmful consequence of our own human feelings of hurt and disappointment... and that is, when it leads to feeling *betrayed by GOD*. When the pain that we feel from the ACTION of another person... or, perhaps, from the LOSS of another person... causes us to lose faith in the One whom we hold ultimately responsible – our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer God. Sometimes we can turn our back on God because we think that God has turned His back on us.

This past week I had the opportunity to see the movie “The Shack.” Some of you have seen it. Others may also have read the book. Now I know that there are varying opinions on the theological validity of these works. Certainly the manner in which it portrays the Trinity... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... IS a bit ‘UN-conventional.’ I don’t believe that it is intended to be a didactic tool to perfectly explain the holy mystery of God... which is, of course, impossible! What I DO see it as is a very moving story about a man’s journey of faith as he experiences tremendous loss in his life. And particularly, how that loss caused him to feel ‘betrayed’ by the

very God he wanted to believe in. Especially, a God whom he wished would visit judgment on the evil for which he sought revenge.

The Central message was to LET GO of the anger and hatred that will only do MORE harm, and to HOLD ON to the only One with enough LOVE to overcome that hurt. The God who in truth had never left the side of his loved ones. His is the kind of love that allowed Jesus, despite the deep betrayal he experienced from one of his most trusted disciples, look Judas in the eye... at the very moment of Judas placing on his cheek 'the kiss of death'... and call him **"Friend."** The same Jesus who says to the hurting, the angry, the betrayed... **Keep your eyes on me.**

There is a line in the movie in which the central character is instructed by "Papa"... the God figure... to 'keep your eye on me.' It is this line that led country music artists Tim McGraw and Faith Hill to write the closing song, of the same name, "Keep Your Eyes on Me." The lyrics are quite powerful, and so I'd like to share them with you. (Don't worry... I'm NOT going to sing it):

Ain't it just like a tear To go and blur out everything  
Ain't it just like glass To fall and break so easily  
Ain't it just like love To leave a mark on the skin and underneath  
Yeah, when the pain goes and shadows everything...

**Keep your eyes on me.**

Ain't it the sinner Who gets all the grace sometimes  
Ain't it the saint Who picks up the pieces left behind  
Yeah, and it's human to hurt the one... you love the most  
When it hurts too much to see...

**Keep your eyes on me.**

When the light in your heart is too burned out to see... **Keep your eyes on me**

You swear you're all alone sometimes... **Keep your eyes on me**

And you can't find your way home sometimes... **Keep your eyes on me**

When Our tears and pain cloud our vision... when our hearts are broken, shattered like a pane of glass. God says, **keep your eyes on me.** As the sinner who wants grace... or the injured who wants justice... God says, **keep your eyes on me.** When we are lost in the dark, with the light in our heart too burned out to see.. God says, **keep your eyes on me.** When we think we're all alone... and can't find our way back home... God says, **keep your eyes on me.**

This week, let us 'keep our eyes on Jesus.' The one who endured such pain and agony so that we might receive grace instead of the justice we deserve. The suffering servant whose heart was broken by the friend who betrayed him... who cried out to his Father in the agony of feeling forsaken... and yet, could love enough to say, 'Father forgive them.' Could love enough to call his betrayer 'friend.' Yes, MY friends, 'betrayal' may be the most painful word. But the most healing word... is JESUS.

### **CHARGE/BENEDICTION**

In our closing Hymn, "*Ah, Holy Jesus,*" I would remind you of the words of the second verse:

**"Who was guilty? Who brought this upon You?**

**It is my treason, Lord, that has undone You.**

**'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was (who) denied you;**

**I crucified You."**

And so, as we look ahead to the events of this Holy Week...

Of disciples who denied their Lord... of a crowd who cried 'crucify him'...

May we humbly admit to our own 'treasonous' actions toward our Lord.

And toward one another. But despite our own human failures to God,

He has promised **'never to leave us nor forsake us.'**

All that God asks of us... is to **'keep your eye on me.'**