

Theme: Our Lenten Path Begins at a Crossing

- 1) On one side: Those who manipulated and misled
- 2) On the other side: He who fought and died

A popular sports phrase says, "It's not whether you win or lose that matters, it's how you play the game." That's certainly true when it comes to something as trivial as a sports game. Whether the end result is a win or a loss, life moves on and we aren't really any better off with one result or the other. But, how you play the game sticks with you. It tells other things about your attitude and motivation. It can have enduring effects of both a positive and negative nature.

We are about to begin a journey here in Lent. Every sermon series is a sort of journey. Each week builds upon the next. We have a goal or destination in mind. We see that come out clearly in the theme of our series – "From Gabbatha to Golgotha." Those are both names of places along the actual route that Jesus traversed in His passion. We will meditate upon the events from beginning to end. How would we compare that sports phrase to our Lenten journey? Does winning or losing matter? Is the way we play the game truly the only thing that matters.

Well, this is no game. What Christ did in between Gabbatha and Golgotha was the most important undertaking in the history of the world. Without certain victory over Satan at the foot of the cross, there would be no life left to move on to. When it comes to faith, winning matters; as does the journey involved. What we hope to gain this Lenten season is an understanding and trust that we win because Jesus defeated the opponent in our place. When we boast in the cross of our Savior today it is because we are both victorious and complete in mind and heart. And it's all due to Jesus.

Most of us know what the word "Golgotha" means. It is an Aramaic word meaning "the skull" and was used to identify the place of crucifixions outside the walls of Jerusalem. We also use the Latin term, Calvary, meaning the same thing. Golgotha symbolized death; the end of a person's life; the ultimate punctuation point.

Gabbatha is a less common term. It only comes up once in the Bible. It, too, is an Aramaic word meaning the "height" or "elevation." It was used to identify the place where criminals stood trial before the Roman governor, also called the "Pavement" because it rested on a raised surface of large stones. Gabbatha represented justice; the rock solid foundation of the Western legal system popularized by Greco-Roman society. It was a place that was wide and bare, where a person's actions were open for all to see. This is where Jesus formally started His path to the cross; the very same path we travel this Lenten season.

But, in our first service this evening, we actually begin before Gabbatha. We get an important piece of the context that led to Jesus' trial. It involves one of Jesus' closest followers and the greatest betrayal in the history of mankind. Judas' story is a sad one indeed, but in it we also see a contrasting picture of Christ's beauty. We focus this evening on the events that led to Judas' betrayal; but not by looking at him so much as the forces behind the act. We read from Matthew 27:1-10:

When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. 2 And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor. 3 Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" 5 Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and

hanged himself. **6 But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood." 7 And they consulted together and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. 8 Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, 10 "and gave them for the potter's field, as the LORD directed me."**

Part 1: On one side: Those who manipulated and misled

We take nothing away from what Judas chose to do. He was in control of his actions and he made decisions that led to his ultimate demise. There is no one else to blame in that regard. But, it would be equally wrong to dismiss the other factors involved – the forces behind the scenes. That blame is rightfully given to Sanhedrin that manipulated and misled Judas into betraying his Lord and Savior.

In Matthew 23, Jesus sounds off on the Pharisees in a series of true and direct statements about their hypocrisy. We quote a few of those verses this evening, which seem to be almost prophetic to their sins against Judas: **"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. "Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:25, 27-28).**

The way these men treated Judas is one of the clearest examples of the description Jesus previously gave. There is certainly wickedness involved in doing anything that is sin. But, it is a different level of evil to play upon knowledge of a weaker person's shortcomings in order to get your way and come our spotless on the other end. It takes great planning of devising within the heart to pull off that feat.

The Pharisees knew that Judas had a weakness for greed. Instead of helping him combat and overcome that sinful condition, as they should have, they exploited it to their own personal gain. Even at the point of our text, when they could clearly see that remorse had led Judas to despair of his own life, they turned a cold shoulder and allowed him to take his own life. One's conscience shutters at the thoughts of these wicked actions.

John tells us that immediately before Judas came to the Sanhedrin, they had taken Jesus away to Gabbatha, to see Pilate. He adds that the Sanhedrin refused to enter Pilates' headquarters because it would have been seen as unclean, and the Sabbath was approaching the following day. Here we see what Jesus was saying. The Sanhedrin wanted to appear beautiful and clean on the outside, but they were dead in their hearts. They were more than content to turn away a man who was in despair, about to kill himself; yet they clamored to stay ritually pure according to their own traditions. Hypocrisy, deceit, extortion, uncleanness, and lawlessness. You have it all here with the way they treated Judas.

Deep inside we want to believe there is good in everyone; and that, if just given enough of a chance, people would choose to do the right thing. This is such an enduring human emotion that it has even become a doctrine of humanism in our day and age. They say, all this talk of sin and condemnation in the Bible is overrated. Human nature is good at its core, if just given the proper time and situation to

express itself. Really?! How could we say that about the Pharisees? It's enough to murder the Son of God; but preying upon Judas this way certainly relieves this situation of any excuses. Here's where it gets difficult for us. It's easy to apply different punishments for different sins, and even different standards between good and evil. No one whose conscience functions properly has trouble condemning the Sanhedrin. But, we forget that only one sin, even of the smallest nature, makes us equally guilty. Could we not also apply the same labels to thoughts and actions in our lives? Extortion, lawlessness, deceit, and hypocrisy. We're guilty of those sins too. Even the greed that overcame Judas. We need Jesus to cleanse those sins just as much as his betrayers did. But, we're much more likely to recognize their problems, or those around us today, than we are to be honest about our hearts.

Part 2: On the other side: He who fought and died

As we approach Gabbatha on our Lenten path, we are met immediately with a great contrast; a fork in the road if you will. In no uncertain terms we must confess that we are counted and numbered on the wrong side – with those who operate by the sins of manipulation and misleading others. And yet, that's not the whole story, or else our focus would end just as soon as it began. On the other side is the One who fought and died for us, Jesus. And on that side remains our hope by faith.

As we think of someone who fought and died, we might see Judas. He fought to undo his betrayal. He returned the money. And he ultimately died over his remorse. Yet, there is no hope in Judas' fall. We should think of the same result when we consider fighting and dying for ourselves. So many people today are of the opinion that faith in Jesus is unnecessary. They can't imagine that God would reject their sincere efforts to be good people or to atone for their mistakes. The greatest lie of Satan has always been, be a good person and everything will work out in the end.

But, once we see ourselves as rebels and betrayers like Judas, we also see that our efforts and death will be no better than his. We can offer our own lives, even out of sorrow for our sins, but we are still sinners in the end – personal sacrifice or not. Our need is highlighted in Judas' confession to the Sanhedrin. "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." Judas was absolutely right but he could have said even more. Yes, he betrayed innocent blood but he was also saved by innocent blood. There is our hope. We need not shed our own blood for our sins, even if they be darker and dirtier than the Pharisees. We have One who shed His innocent blood for us.

And so, Jesus is the One who fought and died that we might have a place on His side of the path. When we face that division between good and evil, as we have this evening, we walk by faith to the side of righteousness in Jesus, the Lamb of God who shed His blood for sinners. If only Judas would have trusted this hope. If only the Sanhedrin would have cared enough about his soul to tell him.

Sometimes to see something the clearest, you need to look at its sharpest contrast. We see that this evening in the contrast between the Sanhedrin's cruelty and indifference to Judas and Christ's limitless love for the lost. Let us remember to see ourselves in this contrast as well, for we walk the same path. Let us be humbled with sorrow for the same sins we have committed; for all too often manipulating others for our own gain or being loveless and cold to those who suffer from sin. Let us also be joyful that Jesus saves us. We hope in that truth is because He has shed His blood for our sins. There is no true comfort outside of this.

