

Everyone knows this guy, or at least has heard of him. He helped Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys capture Fort Ticonderoga. He became a major general in the victory at Saratoga. He endured the harsh winter at Valley Forge. He took a bullet in the leg in one battle. Had his horse land on him in another battle, but he always managed to rally his men against overwhelming odds. He fought so bravely in so many battles. But when you hear his name, you probably never think, “war hero.” Instead, you can only picture a traitor. Because Benedict Arnold is even more famous for one other event in his life. Where he offered to hand over West Point and its defenders to the enemy – for money. He betrayed his own country. There can hardly be a worse crime than that. Except for the one we hear about in this part of God’s Word today:

Luke 22:47,48 - While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd appeared, and the man called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He came near to Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus said to him, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”

And so there is a name even more despised than Benedict Arnold, and that’s the name of the man we see in God’s holy Word this evening. Judas Iscariot. Judas. One of the most common names for Jewish parents to give a son in Jesus’ day. In fact, there are at least eight other Judas’ mentioned in the New Testament. But today I wonder if you could find eight total, anywhere. There aren’t too many people choosing Judas for a name any more. I don’t think it’s even listed in most baby books. And why? Well, he was the traitor of all traitors. Despicable. Disgusting. The worst of the worst. Even in Dante’s *Inferno* where the poet pictures hell with all its many different sections and cells. And way at the bottom, in the place reserved for the worst of all the damned are the traitors. And even there Dante had Judas segregated. Treacherous, repulsive, his soul so cold that even here in the depths of hell, he is encrusted with ice. And the guide, who points him out, wants to get away from there as quickly as possible. “We must depart,” he says, “from evil so extreme.”

And yet as God’s holy Word takes us through the last few hours of Jesus’ earthly life, this incident isn’t brought up so we can boo and hiss and throw things at that nasty villain. Or to be like the convicts in federal prisons, sentenced for the most horrible crimes, and yet they despise and look down on the other inmates who have committed different crimes than they have. No, like when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians about things like these serving as “examples” and being “written down as warnings for us.” Or like we are told in 2 Timothy 3, “All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, well equipped for every good work.” Well here too, even though it’s not a pretty picture, it is used by our Savior Jesus to serve a useful purpose. As we stand in the crossroads between Gethsemane and the trial before the Sanhedrin, we hear Jesus asks the question that makes us have to look into our own hearts and then lets us see into our Savior’s heart. As He asks the question: “Are You Betraying the Son of Man with a Kiss?”

Now this was first asked of Judas, of course. Jesus, as true God, knows everything. And He knew what Judas had plotted. Earlier that evening, in the upper room, John tells us, Jesus “knew who was going to betray him. That is why he said, “Not all of you are clean.” Then after his agonizing struggle in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, He told the disciples to hurry and get up because the betrayer was near. Well, now he was right there. With the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers and swords and clubs and torches. And Judas rushes up to Jesus and kisses him. Now ordinarily, that would have seemed normal. The usual greeting for a close friend. But it wasn’t as warm and sincere as it might have looked. The enemies knew this was the signal to identify the one they were to take into custody. And Jesus certainly wasn’t buying it. As he says, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” Notice he doesn’t ask *if* Judas is betraying him. There is no question about that and Jesus is much too busy for the excuses and rationalizations and lies that would bring on. He is simply asking Judas to look into his sin-darkened heart. “With a KISS are you betraying me?” “Have

you really fallen that low?! Think of what you are doing. Think of what that says about you!” Man, wouldn’t you think that would have stopped him in his tracks and cut him through to the core? That he would have been crying his eyes out and begging for forgiveness? How could his heart be so hard?

Well, it didn’t start just that day. And it wasn’t only the thirty pieces of silver. Although that was part of it. It had started long before, and, at least by human comparison, much smaller. The greed and selfishness and the other “little sins” that grew up like the weeds in the story Jesus told where faith got choked out completely by worldly things and worldly attitudes. Well, Judas had been chosen as one the twelve disciples. He had gone out and done mission work. He had spent three years as a constant student of Jesus. But apparently he had been looking for a theology of glory instead of the theology of the cross. He had somehow seen a connection between Jesus’ ministry and his own selfish materialism. He apparently thought that going in with Jesus would mean political and financial benefit for him. But what a huge disappointment for him when he had watched and listened long enough to know that’s not what Jesus was about at all. That Jesus was about serving, not dominating. That Jesus was going to seemingly waste those powers that could have put them all on easy street. The Jesus was going to die and the same political and economic structures would still be in place. And his pride and selfishness festered inside of him.

And like always, the way of sin is downhill. To the point where Judas became addicted to his sin. And was looking down on others who were showing love to Jesus in a way different from what he thought best. Remember that hint we have that there was something wrong when not even a week earlier, Mary was pouring that expensive perfume all over Jesus’ feet and Judas was so indignant at how wasteful that was and that the perfume should have been sold instead and the money given to the poor. And remember how harsh Jesus’ scolding was, “How dare you look down on the way one of my children shows her love to me.” Oh yeah, and remember the ulterior motive that was really behind Judas’ complaint, “for he was a thief” John’s account tells us, who helped himself to the money in the treasury he kept for Jesus. See, as is most often the case, his “pietism” that looked down on Mary’s response of faith, was really a disguise for his hypocrisy. And now, what could be more hypocritical than betraying with a kiss, the ultimate symbol of friendship back then; the greatest sign of respect between a disciple and his teacher. And it was all *his* idea. No one approached him with the plan or held out some cash to tempt him. Matthew tells us Judas went up to the chief priests and asked them, “What are you willing to give me?” if I hand Jesus to you. Even for these hateful enemies, it hadn’t even crossed their mind that one of Jesus’ own inner circle would stoop so low. So when Jesus had him look inside his heart, by asking, “Are you betraying the Son of Man with a Kiss,” he had to have seen a disgusting, low-life scum.

But what about when Jesus asks us the same question? Not, are you betraying the Son of Man, but are you betraying him with a kiss? And we look to see who he is really asking. I mean, how dare he ask me that. I’ve been with him for all these years; went to Sunday school; Confirmation; my life looks pretty good – just like Judas, right? And then I see that selfishness and pride and greed growing in my heart, the cold heart that puts myself ahead of everyone else. And there’s my lips kissing Jesus at church, but stabbing him in the back when I don’t reflect his love in front of my neighbors. And I tell him what a great friend I am and how much I love him, but when the world offers me more prominence or success or fun or excitement, I sell Jesus into the custody of second place. And again and again I trade Jesus and what he wants in for thirty silver pieces of my own comfort or my own agenda. As the hymn says, “Ah! I also and my sin wrought your deep affliction; this indeed the cause has been of your crucifixion.” Then I realize what a traitor I am. Christ’s disciple in name, but commitment somewhere else. And what an affront to Jesus. To be betrayed by a kiss, by those who claim to be his friends. So he calls on us to look into our hearts.

And of course, he already knows what's in there. But now he wants us to look into his heart. See, there was a reason Jesus asked Judas that question. It wasn't to provide more drama, or clue us in on the obvious. It was to get Judas to see his sin, to bring him to repentance. And there we see the heart of our Savior. Even this cold-hearted person who would trade the Savior in for a little bit of money; even this traitor who could hand Jesus over to die; even this hypocrite who was covering up his guilt with a kiss; even him Jesus wanted to rescue and save. And even knowing what is in our hearts, our Savior also loves us anyway. And he proved it. By letting Judas hand him over to the enemies. By going to the cross for everyone who would ever betray him. By sacrificing himself so God's justice would be fulfilled and we could still have forgiveness and eternal life.

Jesus did that for Judas. He was reaching out to him in incredible love. Wanting to drag him back from the everlasting fires. But Judas rejected that, and we know how his story ended. He looked into his own heart, how disgusting it was. And he felt horrible. He tried to undo his sin, but couldn't. He went back to the priests and elders to return the money, but got no satisfaction. "That's your problem," they said. And Judas, looking only to his heart and what he could do gave up in despair. He hanged himself, and separated himself from his Savior forever. He could see into his own heart, but he refused to look into Jesus' heart and see the love that had forgiven him and was redeeming even him. Jesus, who never says, "That's your problem." But instead, "I made your sin and guilt my problem and took care of it all. Don't take it back on yourself."

Which is the same reason he asks us, "Are you betraying me with a kiss?" Not so we go off by ourselves to drown in grief. But so we will recognize that the solution is not inside us. So we will look at Jesus' heart. And there there is more than enough love, more than enough redemption, more than enough forgiveness, more than enough grace for us all. As His Word lets us know, "where sin increased, grace increased all the more." Because of the Savior who loves even traitors.

You know, after Benedict Arnold fled to England, the Americans said that if they ever captured him, they would cut off the leg that was wounded at Saratoga and bury it with full military honors, and then hang the rest of that traitor up to rot. And in fact, one American General did erect a monument for that leg, a boot with no name on the plaque, to commemorate at least the part of that soldier that was loyal and patriotic. Well our Savior doesn't hold any such grudge. He takes us in our entirety. He has redeemed every bit of our bodies and souls and has commemorated that completed, accomplished fact in the pages of his holy Word. That "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." "And the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." His Word that asks us to look into our own hearts and then into his loving, saving heart. And to know that his grace has us covered. Amen.