"The Potter's Field" -- Matthew 27:1-10

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1 Lent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
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The city of Jerusalem was still waking up near the dawn of the day. It would be like no other day: In the afternoon, just outside the city walls, the Son of God would be crucified for the sins of the world. And in these early morning hours, before the bustling Passover crowds cluttered the streets, the shadowy meeting took place. Judas the Betrayer, full of remorse, confronted the chief priests and elders who had just finished their sham trial of Jesus. Remorseful and despairing, Judas declared, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." If he was hoping for a sympathetic ear, he found none. The chief priests and elders replied coldly to the pawn, "What is that to us? You see to it." Judas had been used. Now they no longer had use for him.

The terror-stricken traitor next ran to the temple courts. Just a few days before, the Lord had overturned the tables of the money-changers, rebuking those who profited at the Lord's house from the buying and selling of sacrificial lambs. On this morning, the money used to purchase the Sacrificial Lamb was spilled again, for Judas hurled his thirty pieces of silver into the Holy Place of the temple. Once again, money was spilled in the house of prayer-a house once again a den of thieves and murderers. It was the final defiant act of a man with no hope, throwing the Son's purchase price into the Father's house. From there, already lifeless while he lived, Judas the Betrayer went and hanged himself.

The thirty pieces of silver were gathered up by the chief priests, and the irony continued. The money was likely drawn from the temple treasury to pay for the betrayal of Jesus; but now that it had been used for that purpose, these pieces of metal, now labeled "blood money," were no longer worthy to go back into the temple treasury. So, with the money, the chief priests purchased a potter's field, a field that to be used for the burial of strangers who died in the holy city. The irony extended: The first death associated with this field was Judas, who hanged himself there. The potter's field was quickly renamed; it is known as Akeldama, the "field of blood." The burial ground of strangers and aliens.

I. Strangers and Vessels of Wrath

Truly, there was no greater stranger ever near Zion than Judas the Betrayer. Attempts have been made to reform Judas, to make him look like a tragic hero. Some claim that Judas fervently believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he betrayed Jesus in order to provoke the Lord to act and save the nation of Israel. The Bible gives us no such clue as to his motives; but it does make clear that whatever his motivations, Judas was a stranger. Not just a stranger to the other disciples, who only thought they knew him. No, Judas was a stranger to the righteousness and grace of God.

Whatever his motives, he did not have faith; he did not trust in the will of God. And without faith, he did not have repentance for his sin. He only had remorse, and there is a tragic difference between the

two. A repentant man is sorry for his sins, but trusts in the forgiveness of God for the sake of Jesus. A remorseful man is sorry for his sins, but has no faith in God's grace. He tries to save himself by his work of sorrow, but no such works can save. Judas, without faith and forgiveness, was left only with despair. If this man who hanged himself in the potter's field is a clay pot of Romans 9 (our epistle for this evening), then he is the one who demands, "Why have you made me like this?!" (Ro. 9:20) He is sorrowful for his evil, but sees no deliverance possible.

Therefore, he is also a clay pot of Psalm 2, our introit for this night. Judas betrayed the Father's only-begotten Son. Refusing the Gospel, he was left only with the Law; thus he is dashed "to pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:9).

In the end, Judas died as a vessel of wrath, destined to be a stranger to God for eternity. Abel's blood cried from the field for vengeance. Judas' blood simply cried.

But let us not grow smug as we consider the end of Judas the Betrayer. No, as we hear of the death of this stranger to God, this broken clay pot of wrath, let us take heed of what the Scriptures say about us in Ephesians 2:11-12:

Therefore remember that you…were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

This, dear people, is our end, too, if we die without Christ. If we are strangers to the covenant of promise, we are destined to be smashed and buried in the potter's field; "having no hope and without God in the world," we also face eternal death, forever strangers and aliens to God and His grace.

This is how we are by nature: sinful vessels of wrath to be dashed to pieces with the iron rod and destined for destruction. Left to ourselves, that is precisely our fate. On our own, there is nothing that we can do, anymore than a clay pot can change itself.

II. Citizens and Vessels of Honor

But, dear hearers, rejoice; for we are not left to ourselves. As we consider this night the bleak despair of Judas, let us not forget the work of the Potter. For while the betrayer may have center stage in the Gospel lesson for tonight, God's hidden work of salvation is accomplished in the one who was betrayed.

Behold the plan of God the Potter: Because we were born vessels of wrath, clay pots to be destroyed, He sent a perfect vessel into this world-His Son, Jesus Christ. For us and for our salvation, the Father filled up that perfect vessel with all of our sin, all of our guilt, and all of our shame. When the perfect Pot was fully loaded with the transgressions of all, God the Pater smashed His Son on the cross, dashing this substitute Stranger to pieces for the sin of the world. The Son was not dishonored for long, however; though He was buried in a strange tomb, He was raised again three days later.

Therefore, behold this mystery. God, who smashed His Son for you, now declares you redeemed for the sake of His Son. You are no longer a vessel of wrath, but a vessel of honor. You are no longer a stranger and alien apart from God-no! Hear more of Ephesians 2:

Therefore remember that you…were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel

and strangers from the covenant of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God… (Eph. 2:11-13 passim, 19)

No longer are you clay pots of wrath to be crushed and buried in the potter's field, ever a stranger to the Lord and His mercy. For the sake of Christ, you are now a vessel of honor-a clay pot so precious that God our Potter… places in you the very body and blood of His Son.

Therefore, dear Christians, rejoice in the privileges of citizenship in the kingdom of God.

Once you were a stranger to the Lord, apart from Him and His gifts of salvation. Now you are citizens of the His kingdom! Now you are members of His household-not just doormen at the gates or servants within, but heirs of the kingdom of God.

Once you were capable only of remorse, able to recognize your sinfulness but unable to be more than sorry. Now the Lord blesses you with repentance: Contrition, yes, sorrow for your sin; but also faith, trust that Jesus has died for you and has removed your sin as far as the East is from the West.

Once you were a vessel of wrath, destined to be smashed with the iron rod of God's Law. Now you are molded for glory, for the Spirit of God dwells in you; and if the Spirit of God dwells in you, so also does the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 8:9-11).

Once, as a vessel of wrath, your plea to God the Potter was "Why have you made me like this?" (Ro. 9:20). But now, as a vessel of honor, it is said of you, "I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved who was not beloved…They shall be called sons of the living God" (Ro. 9:25-26 passim).

Once, as a vessel of wrath and stranger to God, your end was burial in the potter's field, ever to be a stranger to the Lord and His eternal mercies. Now-O vessels of honor, O members of the household of God, your grave is not the potter's field but Jesus' tomb: For we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Ro. 6:4). Mark well with joy that you share the tomb of Jesus, for hear how St. Paul continues in Romans 6: For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection (Ro. 6:5). You share the tomb of Jesus; thus your tomb is empty, too. The Son of God raises you from the dead unto eternal life.

Therefore, dear vessels of honor, dear members of the household of God: Thanks be to God who has dashed His Son to pieces for your sin, that you might be a vessel of honor both now and forever. Thanks be to God who made His Son the stranger on the cross, that you might be members of His household for eternity.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you who were accused before sinners, let also us poor sinners partake of your suffering. Direct us with Your Holy Spirit so that the Devil not mislead us into despair, doubt and other gross sins. Instead give us grace so that we will be sustained in true faith to the end; and finally, grant that we may be sown into God's acre as pure wheat seeds, to blossom forth anew unto eternal life. Amen (Adapted from Gerhard, An Explanation of the History of the Suffering and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ, p. 151)