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Psalms 143:1-8

Matthew 27:1-31

GRACE IN THE CRUX - CHARGES

In biblical times, the name, Judas, derived from the part of Israel called Judah, was a popular name. These days, according to a website that ranks such things, Judas is now the 25,549th most popular name in the United States. We heard more of Judas Iscariot's sad story today. Earlier in this focus on Jesus' journey to the cross, we recounted how Judas, as one of Jesus' twelve disciples, got paid some silver coins to let the local religious leaders know where to find Jesus when he would not be surrounded by his adoring crowds. Jesus had challenged the authority of these leaders because they often had collaborated with the Roman political leadership to maintain the status quo that gave the Jewish people a certain amount of religious freedom at the cost of supporting Roman governing dominance. The high priest and others in his entourage did not appreciate Jesus' critical comments. They take Jesus to the local Roman governor in hopes that he would take care of this problem for them. At times where he could, the governor acceded to the wishes of the religious leaders in order to avoid having to put up with their complaints. Somewhat like President Putin and President Xi, there was a working relationship that met the self-interested needs of each side.

In all likelihood, Judas was frustrated at how Jesus was carrying out his identity as the Messiah. He took it upon himself to try to manipulate the situation where Jesus would be forced to abandon his preferred use of the power of persuasion and love to instead bring about a political uprising that would usher in a different kind of deliverance for the Jewish people. His collaboration with the established religious leaders was an attempt to compel Jesus to be a different kind of Messiah, but things turned out differently than he had hoped. When the religious leaders decide it is time to try to get Jesus executed by Roman officials, Judas is distraught. Guilt-stricken, he changes his mind about what he had done, and with grinding remorse, he tries to return the 30 silver coins he had been paid for his collaboration. He tells them he had sinned by betraying innocent blood. Judas' confession is met with indifference. They cared nothing about his guilty conscience and offer him no

atonement. He throws his blood money into the temple, but the temple offers no assurance of pardon either. Ironically, the religious leaders don't want to use the tainted blood money for temple uses, so they end up using it to meet the needs of the poor, not in life, but in death, providing a cemetery for them.

Judas sadly does not find his way back to Jesus, who would have forgiven him for his misguided treachery. Slipping a noose around his neck, he jumps into the void of his despair. What is saddest about Judas' story is that he did not know what to do with his sense of guilt, which was shared with others of Jesus' followers who denied him or fled from him. He took his deep remorse to his own death instead of converting it into a kind of repentance that could have been graced into ongoing life. For anyone who ever feels like suicide may be the answer for deep despair, there is a better answer in some form of God's loving grace.

The story continues as Jesus is taken to be tried before the Roman governor, a man named Pilate, of the Pontii family. His name today is even less popular than Judas'. He asks Jesus if he claims to be the King of the Jews, which was a charge the religious leaders used against Jesus to try to get rid of him. Ironically, it was a title Jewish people used for the expected Messiah. Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, we hear the story of the Magi coming from a distance to honor a newborn King of the Jews. In that story, we also hear of a Jewish political leader, King Herod, who wants to kill Jesus to maintain his own position of power. Over thirty years later, Pilate doesn't view Jesus as being like any king he had ever known. Was Jesus the King of the Jews? Well, yes, he was the Messiah. Was he what Pilate was asking about? No, he was not interested in a violent insurgency. So Jesus responds to the question about his being King of the Jews with a rather ambiguous answer – "You say so." In essence, he says that Pilate, like anyone else, gets to say how he would understand Jesus' identity and how he would respond to him.

The twist that comes with the annual Passover tradition of a release of a prisoner shows how unjust the whole proceeding was. Jesus was a fairly popular name. Jesus Barabbas was a notorious criminal. In the Aramaic language, his surname meant 'son of the father.' Would this son of the father who was public enemy number one be released, or would the 'son of the father' who showed the way to life

and true peace? Stirred up by the religious leaders, the crowd makes their choice – they demand Pilate release Jesus Barabbas and crucify Jesus the Messiah.

The religious leaders and the frenzied mob carry out a sin of commission by their actions. The Roman governor carries out a sin of omission by refusing to use his power to keep the innocent man on trial before him from being executed. Pilate takes a bowl of water, washes his hands in view of the crowd, and declares that he is innocent of this man's blood. Matthew's readers might recognize the ritual as being like one in the Hebrew scriptures in Deuteronomy where when the body of a murder victim was found, the leaders of the locality were instructed to wash their hands, praying as they do, "Absolve O Lord, your people. Do not let the guilt of innocent blood remain in the midst of your people Israel."¹ Matthew's goal is not to pit a 'good' Gentile Pilate against a 'bad' group of Jews in the execution of Jesus. Never in the name of Jesus are we to use this story or any other to elicit or express hatred toward Jews or Italians or any other group. Rather the story of Pilate's hand washing serves as an invitation to pray the prayer found in Deuteronomy that the guilt of innocent blood not remain in the midst of the people. The gospel account also recounts in the institution of the Lord's Supper where Jesus said that his blood was "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins," which is a message for sinners like us, guilty of sins of commission and omission.

After Jesus is sentenced to be crucified, the Roman soldiers mock his kingship. They dress him up in their cruel mistreatment. They say, "Hail, King of the Jews." But in reality, we come to understand he is King of the Jews and King of the Gentiles too. His innocent blood is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins, bringing a greater liberation than Judas or the religious leaders or the Roman officials could have ever imagined. Whether we have a famous, infamous, or notorious name, we can honor the name of Jesus. No matter what name we go by, God worked even through various forms of evil to bring a greater good, to the glory of God's name. We are included with those guilty of various misguided actions or inactions, sins of commission or omission, but God's grace is poured out broadly. Let us gratefully receive the true ruler of and for our lives. Amen.

¹ Deuteronomy 21:7-8