

Lent 5C 2010

Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philipians 3:4-14

John 12:1-8

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, and anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.” John 12:3

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, o Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” Amen

In today’s gospel reading you can start to hear the drum beat of death. In six days Jesus will be crucified as a common criminal. Jesus himself set those motions in order. He did that by raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, which is the story immediately preceding our gospel story for today.

Jesus knew that by giving life to Lazarus he was sealing his own death warrant. There was no way the Pharisees and chief priests could let this action stand and if the Roman’s found out about it...well, things would get very ugly, very quickly and who knew how many would die as a result.

But before Jesus heads to Jerusalem he stops in Bethany to see his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus one last time. He was as close to them as anyone could be. With this family Jesus could be a regular man, not the Messiah, although they all knew that was who he was.

Jesus comes from Ephraim to see how his friend Lazarus is doing after the rather unusual turn of events. Mary, Martha and Lazarus give a dinner party in Jesus’ honor as well as to celebrate Lazarus’ new life. As Martha is serving Jesus and his disciples, Mary goes into a bedroom and takes down a bottle she has been saving for just this occasion.

Without a word Mary kneels before Jesus and opens the jar of pure nard, which is oil pressed from balsam wood. It was very expensive, worth at least a year’s worth of wages.

Then, in one of the tenderest scenes in the Bible, Mary, kneeling before Jesus in adoration and love, anoints Jesus’ feet; not his head, as would

be the case with a King or prophet, but his feet, which is where the anointing of someone who has died would start.

In this one action she serves the One who came to serve. In this one action she foreshadows not only his doing the same with his disciples at the Passover dinner, but also his death. Both Mary and Jesus knew that events were reaching their climax.

Judas, who will betray Jesus in just a few days and who is keeper of the common purse for the group of disciples, is appalled that such a costly jar of perfume would be used in this way. He says that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Whereas Mary's is an act of true sincerity and devotion, Judas only pretends to be concerned with the poor.

Jesus rebukes Judas. "Leave her alone," Jesus tells Judas. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Mary's extravagant act points to Jesus' extravagant act of love and mercy in going to the cross for each and every one of us.

Last week's Gospel was the story of the Prodigal Son. That is a story that is really misnamed. It is not the son who is the prodigal, but rather the father. To be prodigal means to be lavish, extravagant, and excessively abundant.

In last week's story we see the extravagant mercy and love the father has for his son. He lavishes on him all the honor and glory the father has to give even though his son has disgraced his father and himself. That extravagance is met with hostility by the older son. How dare the father waste his resources yet again on the son who squandered them away in sinful living!

Judas meets Mary's gift of extravagance with hostility as well. How dare she waste something so precious and costly as the nard.

An extravagant gift is often looked upon with cynicism and suspicion. What does that person really want by giving that? Trying to buy

someone's affections, are we? People who are effusive givers are thought of as wasteful on the one hand or as fools on the other.

If you were to Google "quotes on extravagance" you would come to several websites that have just that. I went through four or five web pages and do you know I could only find 2 quotes out of the dozens and dozens that I read that showed extravagance in a positive light? That's it! Just two!

One was from Ralph Waldo Emerson, "There is hope in extravagance." The other is from Oscar Wilde, "Where there is no extravagance there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding." That's all I could find.

Why do we look at other's extravagant gifts with such disdain? Could it be that we might be a little bit embarrassed that we cannot or have not done the same? It is easier to condemn the other than take a long look at where we have fallen short in offering to others the abundant love that God has given us.

It seems we have two responses to an extravagant gift; a feeling of guilt that we don't deserve it, or anger when we believe someone else has received something that they didn't deserve. But that is what makes the gift extravagant to begin with, that we are undeserving of it.

The problem with both of these responses is that they leave no room for the one, true, appropriate response, which is the response of thanksgiving. Without being able to give thanks, we cannot give at all. We tend to hoard what we have and we tighten the drawstrings of our hearts.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian author and theologian, speaks directly to this when he writes: "We have within us, each one, so much more of His power than we ever spend-such misers of miracles we are, such pinch-penny guardians of grace."

Last week's reading of the Prodigal Son shows very graphically God's overwhelming love for us. It shows God's gift of unmerited and immense mercy. God is not a pinch-penny with His grace, His miracles or His mercy.

Today's reading shows Mary's response to that gift of unmerited and immense mercy and what she gives back is her overwhelming love for Jesus. Mary models for us what it means to be a devoted disciple.

In Mary we see humility and service. In Mary we see an intimate act of thanksgiving for restoring her brother to life. She didn't count the cost; she freely gave as Jesus is about to freely give his life.

Jesus did not hold back his grace from any of us and the true response of our discipleship is to not hold back our grace from others, deserving or not as the case may be.

This story isn't just about Mary's devotion, it is also about Judas' difficulty in letting go, of making excuses as to why he can't do as Mary has done. It isn't that we are either Mary or Judas, we are both simultaneously. The story shows us who our every day actions are most like, Judas, and who our everyday actions is to move towards, Mary.

It is in acknowledging this paradoxical action and our paradoxical intentions that we move past our guilt and our anger and can move into the act of thanksgiving for a gift that is so immense, so lavish and extravagant, so unmerited, that there are often no words; all we can do is just kneel at our Savior's feet in adoration and love.

Amen.