

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Fifth Sunday in Lent/March 13, 2016

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I was about five years out of college, a very young priest assisting a rector in Ardmore. My college football coach was speaking at Episcopal Academy and I went over to hear him. We happened to walk together into the auditorium. I had played on the line in college and won the Jesse blocking trophy. My coach commented, "You know Cliff you were the most consistent lineman I've had." In an instant what went through my mind was "I didn't deserve that accolade." I didn't feel I had earned that praise. I answered, "Oh no, I wasn't." Without missing a beat the coach answered, "Okay, you weren't." Coach to the end, he taught me not to reject praise, or be unsettled by it. Rather accept it with gratitude. That which is of greatest value is given not earned.

Jesus is unflappable. Close to Jerusalem where he's pretty sure he will be arrested and likely put to death, he is at a dinner given for him by Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Mary takes a pound of costly perfume – that's a lot! – and anoints Jesus' feet. The aroma of this perfume settles in every corner of the house. It is an extravagant gesture. Perhaps aware of the danger Jesus is facing, Mary offers him her complete devotion. She undoes her long hair and wipes off Jesus' feet. Days later Jesus at the last supper would do the same for his disciples with a basin of water and a towel. It was an act of service and gratefulness for the humanity of one another.

I would have been unnerved by this, as I was with a coach's gratitude. Jesus, however receives this devotion with equanimity. As we prayed in the collect, his heart was fixed where true joys are to be found. When we abide in love that is fixed and certain, God's joy is in us and our joy is complete. We live a life of gratitude. We can learn a lot by people's reactions to Jesus.

Paul understands what it is to earn praise. He calls it confidence in the flesh, that is, in worldly achievements. And he has chalked up quite a few. Circumcised, a Hebrew's Hebrew, the strictest follower of the Law, no one was more zealous than he, righteous and blameless. And yet, all of this faded before the glory of Christ. It meant nothing compared to the cross and resurrection. He knew he had to become like Jesus in his death. He had to become vulnerable, dependent upon God's grace, in order to experience love, to feel joy, and to know the power of Jesus' resurrection. Paul lives in gratitude for the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

Judas is also at the dinner that Mary, Martha and Lazarus gave for Jesus. Judas objects to the gratitude Mary lavishes upon Jesus. One who would betray Jesus is incapable of appreciating her devotion. This is the only time that Judas is described as a thief. He avers that the money for the perfume was wasted on gratitude and could have been given to the poor. Jesus recognizes that Mary's anointing was an anticipation of his death and burial. He accepts her devotion. He says you will not always have me with you. You will have the poor with you, that is, not apart from you, not indifferent to you. You will need to serve them. But this act of service for me who will not be with you long is not inconsequential. One ought not to disregard it.

The incident with Mary reminds me of another and opposite occurrence with Peter. Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Caesarea Philippi. Here also Jesus is aware of the danger that lies in store at the end of this journey. He teaches them that he would undergo great suffering and rejection, and be killed and be raised. Jesus would have appreciated them entering into his suffering like Mary did. He would have valued hearing their fears but that they would be with him and support him as far as possible. Instead of that thankful devotion, the danger was too frightening for them to handle, too hot. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, denying what would all too soon take place. Jesus famously replied, "Get behind me, Satan." You are setting your mind on human fear not on divine love.

Jesus does not want us so consumed by fear that we cannot respond to the needs of another. He does not want us devaluing ourselves as though we can't do anything for another in need. Jesus does not want us trusting in our

own impressive record so that we are above doing anything of service. He does not want us equating money with power giving it willfully instead of selflessly. Like Mary he desires that we enter into the suffering of another, identifying with their hurt, soothing it with the most precious thing we have, the ointment of grateful devotion.

This is the way of the cross that Jesus talked so much about. It is the way of giving ourselves in love for the life of another. Isaiah tells us that the Lord makes a way in the chaotic sea that threatens to overwhelm us. God makes a way where all is as empty as a wilderness. We say sometimes that God makes a way out of no way. It is the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love. It is a love that has proved itself stronger than death. In light of this love everything else fades, whether it is our fear, our diminishment, our impressive works, or the captive power of money. As Paul says, these things are behind us and forgotten in the brilliant glory of the cross and resurrection. This is the love and life toward which we press on and for which we strain.

Mary has been given the life of her brother Lazarus back. It is a story often told. Last week we heard the compassionate father say of his prodigal son, "This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15: 32). The gift of life and God's compassion is constant. Not even death can erase it. This simple truth puts everything else in perspective. When we understand this there is only one way to live, and that is with abundant gratitude like Mary.

Gratitude is our response to being loved. To the extent that we give little place to gratitude our spiritual life is stunted. One thinks of Judas who was incapable of appreciating Mary's gratitude. He had an impoverished spiritual life. Gratitude is not just something we feel, it is something we do. We offer the soothing ointment of our empathy. We pray our gratitude. We gather every Sunday for communion and offer our Great Thanksgiving. We need to receive gratitude. This is often a hard one. Like me with the football coach we often diminish our role and dismiss gratitude. When all we need to do is say "Thank you" or "You're welcome" and mean it from the bottom of our hearts. And sometimes we take gratitude for granted. Oh, the other person knows how much I value them. Maybe so, but we all need to hear it. The soothing

ointment of gratitude can change a person's day. And finally, recollect the good, pay attention to the gift of life. Even though we may have sown with tears, as the psalm says, we will reap with songs of joy. Be grateful.

Amen.