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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, April 3, 2022

5th Sunday in Lent/Year C

First Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21

Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14

Gospel Reading: John 12:1-8

Sermon Title: “Jesus – Always the Better Choice”

Theme

Judas willfully misinterprets as waste Mary’s extravagant act of anointing Jesus’ feet with costly perfume. Jesus recognizes that her lavish gift is both an expression of love and an anticipation of his burial.

Text

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Sermon

Is Jesus unconcerned about the poor? Those of us whose piety is expressed through concern for the poor might be asking. Let's take a deeper look.

The Gospel Reading for today does not come from Luke as it has for the last several weeks, but rather, jumps to John chapter 12. In it, we find Jesus in Bethany, a little suburban town on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It was just a few days before the Passover and so Jews from all over the known world had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover there.

They had heard about this itinerant prophet and miracle worker named Jesus, and most recently they had heard about his miraculous raising of a dead man to life, a man named Lazarus who lived in Bethany. Although it was just a chapter ago according to John's Gospel, we didn't hear that story this Lent.

At the time of today's Gospel Reading, Jesus, along with his disciples, was reuniting with the very same Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, at their home. While they were there, an emotional Mary inappropriately entered the room, interrupted the men, and anointed Jesus' feet with a pound, A POUND!, of very expensive perfume, and wiped his feet with her hair!

John recorded that Judas Iscariot, whom he added was a thief and betrayer, raised the issue of the inappropriate waste of resources in anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. The issue of course was that this was extravagant. This perfume, which cost the equivalent of a year's wages, could have been spared and the money given to the poor! "Imagine how much good we could have done, Jesus, if that much money could have been used to do ministry?"

And as I said at the beginning, Jesus' response may be concerning to some:

"Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

What are we to make of Jesus' comments?

Jesus told the others to leave her alone because Mary was preparing his body for burial. How could Mary have known what was ahead for her Lord?

Jesus was honored by Mary's humble act of devotion. Let us remember that Jesus had that uncanny ability to see through a person's exterior and see the condition of their heart. I believe that in Mary, Jesus saw genuine appreciation from a woman who was totally devoted to him.

The act of anointing Jesus' feet, when taken in its literary and cultural context, displayed Mary's utter devotion to Jesus following the raising of her brother, Lazarus, from the dead. The ointment she used was very expensive. Since there is no indication that Mary belonged to one of the wealthier classes, after all, the meal was served by Martha rather than a servant, the ointment would have been a major expenditure.

Furthermore, dignified observant Jewish women were forbidden to cut their hair. They were also forbidden to let it show except in the presence of their husbands because well-kept hair was, and still is considered one of a woman's charms. So you see, it was significant that Mary inappropriately entered and interrupted a room full of men, let down her hair, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. In this very demonstrative way, Mary humbly acknowledged that he, Jesus, was her Lord, and she was his humble disciple.

Today, in our "Me too" hyper-sensitive cancel culture, we might look down on Mary like Judas did, but perhaps with different questions: Why are you humbling yourself at the feet of Jesus among a roomful of men? Don't you have any self-respect?

But notice, Jesus allowed it. That is because, in Mary, Jesus saw someone who understood who he is. She was expressing her heartfelt appreciation. Yes, Jesus had just brought her dead brother back to life, the sole source of her and her sister's support in life. There was probably some of that. But I suspect there is more than that. I think that Mary saw that in raising her brother from the dead, Jesus has the power over life and death, and she believed he was the Messiah that she and all of Israel had been waiting for. By the way, "messiah" literally means "anointed one" so perhaps for her, the only appropriate response to her revelation was to anoint him!

I'd like to return to the question that I posed at the beginning of the sermon, "Is Jesus unconcerned about the poor?"

This story indicates that Jesus welcomes worship in whatever way we can offer it. We are all gifted differently, so it only makes sense that our heart-felt worship, devotion, and lives of discipleship might look different too.

Some are wealthier than others and it may be their gift to offer gobs of money. God revealed in Jesus Christ will bless them for that.

Others may be crafty and worship God by putting their talents to use in crafting pieces of furniture to be used to lead worship, making banners, or singing in the choir. God revealed in Jesus Christ will bless them for that.

Still, others worship God by teaching the faith to children, leading adult Bible studies, or facilitating our worship by serving as altar care, ushers, or participants in leading worship. God revealed in Jesus Christ will bless them for that.

Still, others may be motivated to worship God by doing acts of mercy; inspiring fellow Christians to collect and assemble health kits, funding camp scholarships, organizing our food distribution ministry and handing out food, and doing God's work with our hands, making a difference in the lives of our neighbors. God revealed in Jesus Christ will bless them for that.

Out of the creative genius of God, we are all created with different gifts and abilities and interests and each of us can, and should, use them in ways that will worship and honor God revealed in Jesus Christ. Not one is more important than another. All are important and necessary.

When I walk into this sanctuary, I am inspired by the beauty of the exposed brick, the intricately carved wood of our pulpit, altar, lectern, and font and it reminds me of the holiness of this place. I hope it does that for you too. I know it often inspires others whom I have given tours.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Jesus isn't saying, extravagant forms of worship are better and we should not worry about the poor. He's simply saying, "Worship God revealed in me in whatever way you are led to, for I see your heart and will bless you for the integrity of your worship." So worship God in whatever way you are able and I believe that God revealed in Jesus Christ will bless you for it.

Back to the scene that is our Gospel Reading, imagine being in Mary's humble home with Jesus. She enters the room with a pound of expensive perfume and breaks open the jar and uses it to anoint Jesus' feet. (Breathing deeply). Hmm! Of all the ways she could worship Jesus, this is what she chose, and Jesus honored her offering. I think what we can learn from this story is that however, we choose to worship, worshiping Jesus is always the better choice.

Let me remind you what happens next. According to John's Gospel, the very next event that takes place is Palm Sunday. What a coincidence, we celebrate Palm Sunday next too!

And then everything goes badly for Jesus.

But as we will discover, he would have it no other way. He is focused on the cross, then the grave, and then the resurrection. (Breathing deeply again) What is that smell? That is the sweet smell of our salvation.

Prayer

Life-giving Jesus, why is it that you love us as you do? Even when we are trying to be Christian we can misunderstand the motives of one another and claim our form of worship is better than another. Forgive us for judging others.

Help us to focus on our motivations and inspire us that all we do in your name is sincere heartfelt worship that blesses you, for you are always the better choice. It is in your name that we pray. Amen