

Sermons from Parma Greece United Church of Christ

MIXED EMOTION –SORROW AND JOY

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 7, 2019

John 12:1-8

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Mary Anoints Jesus

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (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.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

John 12:1-8

In an odd sort of way, today is a day of mixed emotions, of conflicted feelings. As the world emerges from the dark and cold of winter into the light and warmth of spring, our religious tradition calls us deeper into the darkness and gloom of Jesus' suffering and death. Sadness and celebration; darkness and light; the cold of winter and the warmth of spring, the death of Christ and the birth of new hope, all mixed up together in one day.

Just like in our Gospel Lesson. Here we find Jesus at a meal celebrating the raising of Lazarus, a feast in honor of the fact that Lazarus has been returned from the dead. Into the midst of this party, Mary comes and anoints Jesus' feet with perfume and wipes them with her hair; an act that symbolically prepares him for death and burial, an act which also upsets everyone present.

This story is in the beginning of chapter 12 in John. In chapter 11 Jesus is out preaching and teaching when he gets word that Lazarus, his dear friend, is ill. Later he learns that he has died. The rest of chapter 11 is about Jesus' delay in going to Lazarus and about how Martha fussed at Jesus for not coming sooner and how when Jesus saw Mary and all the others weeping, he started weeping too, and finally, Jesus went to the tomb and cried out, "Lazarus, come out." And Lazarus came out, bound up like a Mummy in a bad horror movie; stumbling and smelly but alive.

Chapter 12 opens with the story of a dinner that took place a few weeks later to celebrate Lazarus' amazing return from the dead. Make no mistake about it; this was a party, a fiesta, a banquet. Where I come from we would have had a pig-picking, a fish-fry, a keg party with fireworks. Or maybe a South Carolina Low Country shrimp boil: out on the deck, beach music playing, couples dancing "the shag," little kids running around under the boardwalk chasing fireflies, old people sitting in corners talking and watching young people.

And into the midst of this joyous frivolity Mary comes with a gallon of perfume, expensive stuff, worth thirty or forty thousand dollars. And she plops down in front of Jesus and pours this rich and costly perfume all over his feet and then wipes his feet with her hair.

And the music stops, and the dancers freeze and the old people hush talking and the children stand with their fingers in their mouths and stare while Jesus smiles and lifts Mary up and thanks her for her generosity and her love. There are a couple of reasons for the stunned reaction on the part of the group, one that is spoken of in the text and one that is not.

In the text, Judas says that which everyone else is thinking, ***“My God, woman, what are you doing? You could have sold that and given the money to the poor.”*** Jesus reply here is very important. Many times people have used his words, “the poor you always have with you,” as an excuse for not helping the poor. That is definitely not what Jesus meant.

Jesus meant that Mary understands his immediate present and near future better than any of them. She bought the perfume, the nard, for a specific purpose; to anoint his body when he died, and she more than anyone else, knows that Jesus is soon to die.

Her anointing his body at this time shows that she recognizes that by coming to Jerusalem and raising her brother from the dead, he has angered the people who run things and they intend to kill him. She knows, even if the others don't, that by coming here to this place, at this time, and working this miracle, he has sealed his fate, he has signed his own execution order. In giving Lazarus life he has assured his own death. Mary pours out both her gratitude and her grief when she pours the perfume on Jesus' feet.

And when Jesus reminds them that they always have the poor with them, he is reminding them, and us, of our ongoing call and duty to serve the needs of what he calls elsewhere “the least of these my brothers and sisters.” Indeed what he says elsewhere is that when we serve “the least of these,” we are personally and directly serving Christ. Rather than being the end of our duty to the poor, this moment with Mary at his feet is really the beginning of a higher call and a wider duty for all of us.

The second reason people reacted with shock and dismay is not spoken of in this text, but is easily understood. Jesus was a single man and a rabbi; “decent women,” and “decent rabbis” just didn't touch each other like that. But in her gratitude and her sorrow, Mary had thrown caution to the wind and gave vent to her deepest and most honest feelings about Jesus, her savior and her Lord.

This text calls us to do the same. It calls us to a deep, deep grief for the death of Jesus; a profound and abiding sorrow for our faults and failures, our evil deeds and iniquitous acts; in a word, our sins, that put him on the cross to bleed and die to save us from ourselves.

It also calls us to a full and rich and sober joy and gratitude for the new life that Christ won for us there. Martin Luther called it a “sacred exchange,” a “divine trade.” On the cross Jesus took on our sins and gave us his holiness. Upon the cross Jesus died our death and gave us his life. There on that tree, Jesus accepted our fate and gave us his future.

And in response we are called to weep for our sins and his death and then to pour out our lives in service of Christ through service to the poor and needy of this world.