

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Tending the Presence”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, April 7, 2019

**Isaiah 43:16-21**

*Thus says the Lord,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.  
The wild animals will honour me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.*

**John 12:1-8**

*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.'*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our faith, our imaginations, our soul to you. I pray that you would take whatever it is that we have within us, whatever is on our mind or on our heart this day. I pray that you would take the words we offer in prayer and in song, the words that we've heard read from the prophet and from the gospel. The words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share and even the silence, the peace within. Take all of this. Touch, bless and transform it into the living word. Your word. The word of Christ and let that word minister to each of us as we have need. Let us each hear a word for us. Where we need comfort, may you speak it. Where we need to be challenged, may you speak it. Where we need hope or peace or love, speak so that we might leave this place and continue to speak what we hear. That we might speak your word to those that we meet in the days ahead. I ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I don't know how many times I've heard the story of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus. But until this week I'd always pictured it in my head as Mary showing up at a dinner that her sister Martha had carefully prepared. Her brother Lazarus had invited all the people that they wanted to invite, including Jesus, and as everyone's assembled there, Mary walks in with this giant blue can of Crisco oil and she takes her hand and digs out a giant glob of this highly perfumed Crisco oil and she slathers it all over Jesus' feet and I could see it sort of squishing through her fingers and his toes and I'm getting kind of grossed out, and what is she doing? And then the hair. Oh [laughter], and it wasn't until this reading that, that image shifted for me. It wasn't a can of Crisco that was perfumed. It was a jar of precious oil, infused olive oil that they had taken from nard plants and they had soaked them in this oil and then they pressed them to get all the fragrance out of the plant and she had this precious gift and she was giving that gift to Christ to prepare him for what we know is going to be the roughest week of his life coming up. The week in Jerusalem where he's arrested and then crucified. He's buried in a tomb and then on Easter Sunday, he comes back promising us peace and new life. And so I was thinking about this story in relation to us at the fifth Sunday of Lent and that we're in that transition time. We're ending lent and we're starting ever so carefully to turn towards Easter Sunday. We've still got a couple weeks before we get there but the story and sort of our inner desire is shifting from this time of intense consideration of our own foibles during Lent. The time where we consider our earthly nature and make peace with it, hopefully, and we're beginning to move towards the utter celebration and joy of Easter Sunday and so as I thought about that transition and Mary anointing Jesus' feet with this expensive perfume, several things kind of lifted up to me and I want to offer them to you. The first is that I went to a very liberal seminary in New Jersey and there were professors who would read this story and then would imagine all kinds of details about Mary's relationship with Jesus. Again, if you think about a woman coming in and rubbing oil on someone's feet and then taking her hair and wiping it off, they were thinking that Jesus and Mary had--let's just call it really intense friendship. I want to clean it up because I know there's some kids here, all right. That they were not just teacher and follower but that they were intimate, friends, etc. and I've always wondered about that because Mary doing this one act seems to-- it's just there's just something strange about this act and it's like, what is she up to and why does Jesus let her do it? And I think if I was honest and maybe you have this within you as well, it's not Judas. Judas is not the only one who was asking, why are you spending this precious expensive perfume? Why are you putting it on Jesus' feet when we could have sold that perfume and fed the poor? So as I was thinking about all that, wondering about the Crisco and the relationship and what's going on, I came across a blog from of all places, the Getty Museum, and the blog was explaining dining customs in the time of Christ and it had renderings of different layouts where people would dine and the thing that's important for us to realize is when people in the time of Christ came together to eat they did not come to a table with chairs. Often they would come and sit on a beautiful rug that was exquisite, hand-crafted, very luxurious. That's where the family got together and for many families that rug was their prize possession. Or they would gather on cushions that were laid out around slightly raised tables about so high and there would be some food on it. So they're not coming to a table with chairs. They're coming to recline around and be together and what this blog pointed out was that in every house of means when there was a big event, a hosted dinner if you will, like the one Lazarus was throwing for his friend, Jesus, there would be a servant who would stand at the doorway and the servant's job was to take off the shoes of all the guests, to wash their feet, to wipe them off and then to wash their hands and wipe them off and once all that cleaning was done, then the servants would welcome them into the space and they would go in and take their position ready to share the meal together.

I realized that Mary is doing the work of the servant. She's washing the feet and drying the feet and getting Jesus ready for the meal, and it just so happens that she does it in a very unique way which He attributes to the fact that she knows He's going to die soon. But the idea of her taking the servant's role explains the relationship that she had with Christ, and that's further enhanced the idea of being a servant and the fact that she looks up to Jesus. On Easter Sunday in the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John when Mary is looking frantically for her friend Jesus, the tomb's been opened, and she can't find her friend, and the gardener speaks her name. Mary does not say, "Oh, thank God. It's Jesus. You're alive." She doesn't say, "Oh, friend," or even companion. She says teacher. Teacher. And the idea of Mary being the servant and caring for the special guest who's Christ and the fact that she says teacher really shows that Mary is a committed disciple of Christ. She sees herself primarily as His student and a very devoted student. And when she uses the perfume, she ratchets up the exuberance. And so for us as we come into this season-- or we end the season of Lent, and we begin that transition towards Easter, we need to understand ourselves in the position of Mary, the devoted student, who is serving Christ and getting Him ready for whatever's next in His ministry. And for us that means every now and then we're sharing the expensive perfume when people around us might be asking questions as why are we doing something so extravagant?

And I'm just going to offer a brief example of that to each of you. I can imagine that there was more than one person in Kirkwood who drove by this church years ago as the remodeling was taking place who maybe had a friend in the

congregation and learned that the remodel cost \$10 million or more. I can imagine that there was at least one person, who when they drove by the church knowing the details and how much money the church was spending to take care of itself said, "Well, I can't believe they're spending \$10 million to remodel the church. Shouldn't they give all that money to the poor?" I know I would have asked it, and maybe some of you have asked it as well. And Jesus has the most peculiar answer or response to giving this precious gift to the poor. Jesus says, "You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." So was Jesus giving us permission to ignore the needs of the poor, to just be extravagant, to just take care of our own needs? Of course not. What Jesus is doing in his response is quoting from Deuteronomy the 15th chapter beginning at verse 7. Where we read, "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lend enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'Oh, the seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" So what I realized in one of those moments this week, thinking about the act of faithful service that Mary is providing, and thinking about the quick response that Judas has and I have, and I'm sure some of you have, is that really in this passage we're bringing both of these things together and it's-- the message is it's okay to be extravagant when you're tending the presence of Christ and you need to always give to the needy and take care of the poor. It's not either or, it's both and. It's both and.

And then I ran across the story that, in a strange way I think, ties some of this together. It talks about extravagance. It talks about fragrance. And it talks about taking care of the poor. The story is about a woman named Anne Smith in Charlotte, North Carolina. Anne's a volunteer of a lot of different things, and one of those things is a local food pantry where she brings food and then helps serve it. And somewhere along the line, she gets this dream of having a food bank, a big warehouse where a lot of stuff is brought to and then gets distributed, much more efficiently, to several pantries and churches in the area. She's also got some connections and so she gets an appointment with some executives at Bank of America on the top building of the skyscraper in downtown Charlotte, 9:30 in the morning. But because she's Anne and busy and has lots of things going on, she has to go to the bakery in the morning before that meeting to pick up whatever they're going to give so she can take it to the lunch she's going to after the meeting. So she's got before and after engagements of taking care of the poor, and right in the middle is this meeting with these executives. She goes to the bakery that morning not knowing what the bakery's going to offer, and finds out that all they have is dozens and dozens and dozens of doughnuts. And so she takes them, right? She's like, "Give it. Give it. We're going to get people fed." So she fills her car with doughnuts, drives to the bank parking lot, parks the car, gets in the elevator and starts to ride up to the top floor. Someone else, an employee of the bank, gets on the elevator with her, down in the parking garage, rides up part of the way and on the way up says to her, "Excuse me, but you smell a lot like doughnuts [laughter]." She said, "Yes, I do." She told the story of what she was engaged in and how she's been to the bakery to pick up goods, and she is going to go after the meeting she has upstairs and feed people in need. By the time that person gets off the elevator, they are now a volunteer at that food pantry, helping her feed the hungry. She gets to the top floor, she had a whole presentation worked out of how many people were in need, how many hungry people that were that weren't being fed, how much food was being wasted. Everything was set out. And between that person getting off the elevator and her arriving on the top floor, she thought, "I'm not doing that." So she walked into a conference room full of people in suits and dresses, fancy clothes, and she just walked around all of them before she sat down. They welcomed her, said, "What can we do for you?" And she said, "I had this big presentation ready but really, what I want to talk about today is doughnuts." And they said, "What?" And she told them the story of how there're hungry people in downtown Charlotte. She went to a bakery to get what they give, today it was doughnuts, and so she was going to take those doughnuts and feed them to whoever was hungry. Needless to say, Bank of America became a prime sponsor of the food bank that she started. All because she smelled like doughnuts.

We never know how God is going to speak to us, whether it's a fragrance, an idea, or a conversation. But to me, what this passage tells us is that we can be exuberant as we tend the spirit within, whether it's exuberance in taking care of the church or some exuberance in taking care of our own needs of protecting the light and source of God's presence within us. And we also need to take care of the needs of our neighbors. And thankfully, God blesses us enough that we can do both. Amen.