

Lent 5 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 3, 2022

John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4b-14; also Isaiah 43:19; Psalm 126:5.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“I am about to do a new thing,” God says in our first reading this morning. The fifth Sunday in Lent is the final Sunday before Holy Week. And so the scriptures on this day point forward to the passion and resurrection of Jesus. *I am about to do a new thing*, God says in the first reading. And then comes the psalm, which points to the sorrows of the passion and the joy of Easter: *Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy*. And then the apostle Paul kind of gives the mission statement for Holy Week: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings*. The Church places these texts in front of us, intending to prepare us for Holy Week.

The Gospel reading on the fifth Sunday of Lent always comes from this section of John. John chapters eleven and twelve. The fourth gospel is saturated with dramatic irony. That is the literary technique in which we know things that the characters in the story do not. All of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to the Last Supper to the arrest and torture of Jesus, to the cross, to the women visiting the tomb— all of that, in all of the gospels, is pervaded by dramatic irony. *We* know what is going to happen. *We* know why it is happening. But Peter does not. Judas does not. Pontius Pilate does not. Jesus knows what he is doing, and where he is headed. So *we*, the readers of the Bible, are with Jesus in that *we* know, with Jesus, what is going to happen. And why. But all of the other characters are confused or clueless.

It is in this atmosphere of dramatic irony that Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, uses some very expensive oil to anoint Jesus’ feet. Jesus says a couple of things that we can understand, that the other characters cannot. Jesus links this ointment, this anointing oil, with his death. And Jesus makes the statement that he will not be around forever. Verse one of our gospel reading says, “Six days before the Passover.” That would be the day before Palm Sunday, a holy day for later Christians, still celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox churches as Lazarus Saturday. But when Jesus says, “You do not always have me,” we the readers know that he will be dead in the tomb within six days. That’s the dramatic irony that I am talking about. When our reading begins, “Six days before the Passover,” in John’s gospel it means, “Six days before the crucifixion.” We know. Jesus knows. The other people in the story do not.

Mary possesses something of great value. Something that could be translated as perfume, or myrrh, or ointment. When Judas asserts that it was worth three hundred denarii, a denarius was one day’s wage. So according to Judas, it was worth at least three hundred days of income. By

our reckoning, thousands of dollars, although we should be careful about trying to convert biblical currencies into dollars. But Mary possesses this thing of great value, and she gives it to Jesus. She does not hand it to him. But she wipes his feet with it. So her gift is both the ointment, and her service. And then she mops up the excess with her hair, which spreads the aroma through the whole house. This is an extremely lavish and sensual action.

It does not indicate that Mary is a prostitute, which is a false inference that arises from a composite character whom the Church created by combining multiple stories and characters into one, a composite character which vastly diminishes the individuality and the messages of a collection of women. So Mary is not being a harlot, or slatternly, (which are the euphemisms for “slut” that are utilized sometimes in the King’s English.) She’s not being that. Mary is, however, being lavish, and sensual, and intimate with Jesus. And something about her interacting with Jesus in this way— her gift to Jesus— causes Judas to lash out with anger.

In Luke, in the separate and distinct gospel according to Luke, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens, and she is upbraided by her sister, Martha, for not making kitchen work her top priority. So this is not the first time that Mary’s choices have been questioned. She has given Jesus her undivided attention, which frustrated her sister Martha. And now she has given Jesus this lavish ointment— our translators call it “perfume”— which has now drawn the wrath of Judas.

In both of those stories— Luke and John, the kitchen story and the ointment story— Jesus comes to Mary’s defense. He praises her choices over and against her detractors. Dramatic irony means that we, the readers and hearers of these stories, we can see that she made the right choices. Most of us would love to have Jesus— the historical Jesus— come to our homes for dinner. We know who he is. We have a lot of questions to ask him. We have a lot of requests and favors to ask him. So it makes me indignant that the people around him in these stories don’t appreciate him. *“You do not always have me,”* he says. But Mary got it right. Even though she is in the story. Even though she does not know how the story will end. Even though she does not know that Lutherans will stand up on their feet on a Sunday morning to hear John the Evangelist tell her story. Even though she is as unaware and clueless in her situation as I am unaware and clueless in my situation. Mary got it right.

It seems to me that each of us has some treasure. Something enormously valuable. It might be rare perfume. But I suspect it is money or real estate. I suspect that it is family or community or friends or a profession. Or perhaps, like Jesus, our treasure is time. The one treasure that grows more valuable year by year, day by day. What we do with our treasure is up to us. But some of the things that we do with our treasure will give glory to God. And you have my permission to replace the word God with a word like “life” or “the universe” or “existence.” You have treasure that can give glory to life. Glory to the universe. Your treasure could very well be the olive that the perfect martini cannot do without. Your treasure could be the vanilla extract that the perfect cake cannot do without. Your treasure could be the smile that can prevent someone’s soul from succumbing to the darkness. I do not know what your treasure is. And you may be a little bit clueless yourself! But you have it. And the universe will become a more beautiful place, a more

joyful place, when you share your treasure. In church language, God will be glorified. In church language, the kingdom of God will come nearer. Because of *your* treasure. Mary got that right. And we can take heart from her example.

One of the best things that Paul ever wrote was his letter to the Philippians. In today's second reading, he said, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." The *surpassing value* of knowing Christ Jesus. I love that. The *surpassing value*. In the older English translation, it said the "excellency" of knowing Christ Jesus. Mary, in her own way, had grasped the surpassing value of knowing Jesus. And she used her treasure to bear witness to what she had grasped. At the end of the day, at the end of the story, that is the best that any of us can do, or hope to do.

When we read the stories of Holy Week, there is dramatic irony because we know the end of the story, we know the purpose of the story. And the characters do not. But in the living of our own lives, we are the characters, and we are as uncertain about the story of our lives as are any of these other followers of Jesus. "*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal,*" Paul tells us today. Not that I have already obtained this. But the surpassing value of knowing Jesus frees us to use our treasure to bear witness to the faith we have that our story does indeed matter. Our story matters because our story is ultimately God's story. Amen.