

Sermon – “The Lord, Who Makes a Way”

Sunday, March 13, 2016

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 43:16-21 and John 12:1-8

Rev. Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading comes from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and contains an ancient promise of God to the people of Israel. Hear now this reading from Isaiah chapter 43, verses 16 through 21.

*16 Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19 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. 20 The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.*

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John, in the twelfth chapter, verses 1 through 8:

*1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 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. 4 But 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.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

*The Word of the Lord.*

**Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: “The Lord, Who Makes a Way”

*The text: “Thus says the Lord...I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:1a, 19b*

There are a couple of unexpected elements of the story we just heard about Mary, Jesus, and Judas. If you're familiar with the story of Jesus, it's possible you didn't even particularly notice what would certainly be the oddest piece, objectively speaking, which is in the very first sentence, where it describes Lazarus as someone “whom he had raised from the dead.” But that reference, just in passing, to a stunning and astonishing occurrence, isn't the centerpiece of this particular story. It serves here two other functions: One is to remind us of who Jesus is, and from whom he comes, to keep in mind that we are dealing with divinity. The other is to place this story among familiar characters.

Mary, her sister Martha, and their brother Lazarus all first appeared earlier, in John 11 (the point at which that raising from the dead occurred),<sup>1</sup> so someone hearing or reading the whole Gospel account would already be familiar with these characters as people Jesus knew and loved.

We, being familiar with the other Gospels as well, are even more familiar with Mary and Martha. Luke records another story with which you may be familiar: “[Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”<sup>2</sup>

This depiction of the two sisters is right in line with what we find happening in today’s story. Martha is serving the dinner. Mary is again found at the feet of Jesus. This time, she is not merely listening; she is anointing his feet with expensive perfume, in a dramatic display that fills the whole house with fragrance, and in which she wipes off his feet with her own hair. This behavior on her part is not only not something we’d expect today, it does not seem to have been expected by those present at the time, either, and it seems to have caused discomfort.

The big thing that sticks out as really unexpected in this story, though, is Jesus’s response, which comprises several surprising things combined. His last statement, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me,”<sup>3</sup> is not something we might have imagined Jesus saying. And it follows right after him referencing his burial, an odd thing to say when he isn’t dead or soon expected to be by anyone present. But most of all, we might not really expect him to respond this way at all, defending her owning an absurdly expensive perfume.

That is, the thing we might most be thrown off by in this whole story, if we’re trying to be disciples of Jesus, is that...well, Judas actually seems to make perfect sense. Someone has just brought in a fine product that only a very rich person would probably have owned. If Judas’s estimate of its value is accurate and not hyperbole, this is something like a year’s wages in a single jar of perfume. If we have been attending to Jesus’s own words and paying attention to his deeds, we will remember his comments throughout the Gospels in which he scorns those who do their devotions in public and who keep rich things while the needy around them suffer. If we have ourselves listened and struggled with what it means to follow this man, then we might well expect Jesus *himself* to ask the question of why this money was spent on a costly product used in an elaborate public demonstration of devotion, rather than being sold and the money given to the poor.

And yet, it is Judas who says this, and Jesus who defends her. It is a moment in which we are caught by surprise, much like when the disciples were taken by surprise when they thought they were helping Jesus by keeping the children from bothering him, only to be reprimanded instead. Our surprise is only slightly lessened by the fact that we know Judas was the soon-to-be betrayer, and that his real motivation was stealing the money. The fact still remains that whatever hidden

---

<sup>1</sup> See John 11:1-44.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:38b-42 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>3</sup> John 12:8 (*NRSV*).

purpose Judas may have had, the actual words he said, about selling it and giving to the poor, are the sort of thing we might expect would be right in line with Jesus's desires.

And that fact should make us pause a little bit.

Because we like to think we are pretty sure what is in line with Jesus's desires. We think this even though if we're honest we know that his teachings often make us uncomfortable, and his parables sometimes leave us confused. They even discomfited and confused the apostles themselves. And yet we have the consistent temptation to act as though we have a pretty good handle on Jesus's opinion about everything.

This is dangerous for a few reasons. One is that it makes us vulnerable to being misled. How many people in that room, hearing Judas criticize Mary for not giving to the poor, thought, "That's right!" only to be shocked when Jesus contradicted him? I suspect it was many or most of them. Likewise, when we are too sure of our own sense that we have a pretty good idea of the message of Jesus it makes us susceptible to manipulation. We can be led astray into following someone who, like Judas, has other intentions and is just good at speaking in language that sounds right to us. We are warned straightforwardly by Jesus on numerous occasions that there will be plenty who seek to lead us astray.

Another danger is that it makes us self-righteous. Note that the specific incident involved here involves criticizing someone else for being insufficiently moral. We surely are not meant to refrain from saying out loud what we believe to be right and wrong, but we should be careful, for moral disapproval of another person's deeds nearly always creates in us the dangerous byproduct of moral self-approval. And I'd suggest we should particularly avoid being overly sure of ourselves when, as in this story of Mary anointing Jesus, the question at hand is someone else's way of expressing love for Jesus.

Finally, being too sure that we know what Jesus is really about makes it far too easy for us to avoid questioning ourselves whenever we toss things into the "Jesus would like this" category or the "Jesus would not like this category," based in reality on gut reactions in ourselves that could be coming from any inner motivations at all. Certainty lets us stop listening for more things from Jesus that might tell us something different than what we already think. It lets us, like Judas, mix in our own purposes and keep it secret even from ourselves that our *real* reasons for approval or disapproval might be selfish ones.

For we frown disapprovingly at Judas, knowing he wanted the money in the group's coffers because he stole from them, but who among us doesn't also cheat Jesus in some fashion? Who among us doesn't take for ourselves some of what we, as disciples of Christ, know was really given to us in order to pass along as a blessing to someone who needs it more?

What we need, then, is not to be so sure but to keep listening, recognizing that there is mystery in the ways of God. Truth and goodness are more and different than we fully know. We need to set aside our certainty sometimes and be willing to hear what we don't expect.

And we find a model for this right here in front of us. We met her in the reading of the day, and learned more about her in another story of her encounters with Jesus. Martha did what she was

sure was the right thing to do, all action, a faith filled with work...and yet Mary chose the better part. She sat and listened. And then when this Jesus visited them again, she once more sat at his feet, and this time worshiped.

Many of us are people who value action. Certainly I am someone who leans toward putting the emphasis on doing. And I don't think that is entirely wrong. And of course we sometimes prefer to be neither Martha nor Mary, neither the one serving nor the one listening and worshiping. It is always tempting to listen only shallowly, feel good for having done so, and then do nothing at all. This does present a problem when we remember the various warnings from Jesus about the importance of both hearing his words *and* doing them.<sup>4</sup>

But to do them, we do have to hear them clearly, and to hear them, we have to listen. And when we listen, and we hear, and we hear of the Lord who makes a way in places we did not think there was a way through, who does a new thing, who gives water in the wilderness, who finds the cracked and dry places in our lives and brings a river to the desert, then we, like Mary, might too find that stopping again to worship is one of the things we must do.

The Old Testament has numerous passages expressing the joy the writer feels in continually meditating on the Lord's law.<sup>5</sup> That joy sounds odd to us, maybe, but I think it is connected to what we hear in today's reading. Meditating on the law of the Lord is a stop, a pause, a moment to listen, and hear. Jesus saw Mary criticized for not going out and doing, and he turned around and defended her choice of stopping before him instead. Hearing, learning, thanksgiving, and pure adoration of God are being lifted up here as worthy things.

Perhaps without those things, we forget why we are doing any of it at all, and risk running aground for lack of sitting at the feet of the Lord and absorbing the wisdom that is above all human wisdom.

Suddenly this is sounding an awful lot like a sermon about sabbath, isn't it? I think it is, in part.

The spirit of anxious works says that we have no room for sabbath. But from the stories of Mary and Martha we are reminded that a cessation of our labors is okay and even good. We are reminded that in Jesus Christ we know, in the form of a person, the Good News of God's faithfulness as Isaiah declared so long ago. We are reminded that, whatever our obligations of service to the world may be, when we encounter the amazing grace of God our first response, like the one healed leper who returned,<sup>6</sup> is to come before the Lord, give thanks, and sing praise; and it is then, in that spirit, that we go out and do our work in the world.

May God grant that our hearts will always be full, not of the false peace of self-righteousness, not of the thin veneer of peace found in being sure we know what Jesus wants of us, but full of the deep peace of being able to sit in his presence. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Matthew 7:24-27.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Psalm 1 and Psalm 119.

<sup>6</sup> See Luke 17:11-19.