

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 6, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21; 2nd Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14
Scripture for Message: John 12:1-8 “Restored”

Today in our story we hear about a woman who has known grief and joy. She wept at the death of her brother Lazarus, and now he sits at the family table, alive and well. Imagine her relief, her joy, her amazement at this turn of events. This is all because of another much-loved man who sits before her, Jesus. How can she ever repay him? How can she ever let him know the depth of her gratitude, the depth of her faith?

Reading these words from John, we are pulled into a scene of domestic peacefulness, a family eating with friends – feasting and enjoying life. We see Jesus taking a break from healing, creating miracles, and casting out demons – a break to restore and receive joy and love. Hindsight tells us that things will turn around quickly but for now Jesus and his followers are enjoying a little down time. Maybe Mary sensed that something would change all that, and maybe she wanted to create a “moment” to remember. It certainly was a statement for her to anoint Jesus’ feet and wipe them with her hair, a scandalous statement that created a moment memorable enough for John to write about. Jesus stated that she bought that expensive perfume / oil for the day of his burial. I wonder though if she did that consciously or was it something “divine” that compelled her to make the purchase.

What John writes about Judas Iscariot is an aside and written from the benefit of hindsight. John did not know, none of the disciples knew what Judas was about to do. Judas was a member of their group, someone who was chosen to be the keeper of the common purse, they obviously trusted him. John’s account of this event has the other disciples being more passive as they witnessed this anointing of Jesus. I wonder though if they also thought this was a wasteful extravagance. Mary could be considered a prodigal at that moment. Certainly, they knew Jesus maintained solidarity with the poor and outcast, which was a big part of his ministry – they weren’t using the money and donations to line their own pockets.

Jesus tells Judas, the rest of the disciples needed to hear it as well, that they would always have the poor, but they would not always have him with them. This was another time that foreshadowed what would happen soon, something that he had been telling them along the way as they journeyed toward Jerusalem. Those warnings about what would happen in Jerusalem might be what compels Mary to anoint him at that moment. I think too his statement about always having the poor was to foreshadow his knowledge that this world would always fail to adequately care for the least of these among us. Jesus is not saying to his disciples don’t worry about the poor, but he realizes that poverty is inevitable, not because it is preordained but because humanity has a long history of neglecting others.

So, I don’t think the message in this scripture reading is about giving. I don’t think Jesus’ primary focus was generosity or what we do or do not do for the poor. When we pair this scripture from John’s gospel with the other scripture readings for this Sunday, the message is clearly about restoration, gratitude, wholeness, and new beginnings. Isaiah’s words tell us that God is doing a new thing, making a way in the wilderness. The Psalmist too, in our call to worship, reminds us that God is a restorer of fortunes, and has done great things for us. The Psalmist encourages the people to rejoice. That is something that I feel when I imagine what was going on that day as that

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family and those friends supped together. I feel joy when I think about Mary pouring that expensive highly scented oil on Jesus' feet and drying his feet with her hair. When I imagine myself in that room I hear laughter, celebrating, and joy, I hear all of that before the condemnation begins.

I remember there was a former nun in one of my seminary classes. She left the Catholic church for personal reasons, but she retained some of that "formality" that seems to emanate from nuns. In one of our "worship" lectures we were talking about how a worship service should be conducted and she stressed that worship services should be solemn. She felt showing appreciation for special music by applause was totally out of line and laughter should be kept to a minimum – no telling jokes no play acting and certainly no extemporaneous eruptions of joy or praise. If she were striving for perfection in worship, I guess this church would be on her no-no list.

Christians have a bad reputation for being a joyless bunch overall – actions that some people consider fun or playful are actions that some religious institutions shun. When we look at what the gospel writers tell us of Jesus' life, we can surmise that he had fun with his friends, played a game or two – we know some of the activities he liked involved food and wine. Joy should be in our DNA as Christians, celebrating certainly is part of our DNA. But those are the very things for which the Pharisees and religious elite persecuted Jesus.

I wonder though if we should make a distinction here – is the joy that comes from following Jesus different from the joy that comes from following the things of the world? People seek joy in entertainment – even churches seek entertainment in worship, seeking joy while often forgoing a solemn sacred worship experience. Movies, popular music, even comedy sketches become part of the worship experience to keep people's attention. Eugene Peterson writes: "Society is a bored, gluttonous king employing a court jester to divert it after an overindulgent meal."¹ That seems to be an accurate description of our world today, but that kind of joy is temporary and never settles into our lives – when those activities become too expensive for average participants the joy fades or we spend quality time striving for something that might be beyond our reach – that is not joy but struggling, seeking and not finding.

The world cannot offer us the permanent joy that comes from living in response to the abundance of God. Joy is a product of abundance, it is a response to God's generous outpouring of grace, mercy, and compassion. Joy is a consequence of Christian discipleship – we cannot create joy, but it is a natural response to what we find in our relationship with God through Jesus. I read from Eugene Peterson's book on the Psalms titled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* that "Joy has a history. Joy is the verified, repeated experience of those involved in what God is doing." (99).

We can have that kind of lasting joy because, as we read in Isaiah, God is doing something new. God is creating paths in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Through Jesus Christ, God is doing something new. Maybe that is what Mary had in her heart and thoughts as she extravagantly anoints Jesus at that table. God is at work restoring fortunes – through Jesus, Lazarus has been restored to life – now that family is again restored to wholeness – that is reason for Mary's joy. Mary expresses that joy in an extravagant act – thinking not of what a better use for the oil would be, thinking only of the best way to honor this man who has restored life to her brother, wholeness to her family. This was an act of gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise. Mary's actions were direct

¹ Eugene Peterson. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. 2nd ed. IVP Books. 2000. Print. 96-97.

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participation in what God is doing in the world – making a way for those who sow in tears to reap with shouts of joy.

Dennis Smith writes: “The lections for this week emphasize expectation and longing for the “new thing” that God has promised (Isa. 43:19). Psalm 126 expresses a hope that “those who sow in tears may reap with shouts of joy” (Ps. 126-5). In Philippians, Paul places his hope in “know[ing] Christ and the power of his resurrection.” The hope and longing expressed in these readings are encapsulated in the anointing story in John.”² The new thing that God has promised is what Mary acknowledges as she anoints Jesus, although she does not yet know the full implications of her actions.

God has promised a restoration of fortunes – that happens as we become followers on the path Jesus shows us. God has promised to turn sorrow to joy and given us a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. God promises restoration, a new heaven and new earth where God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Scripture is full of the “new thing” God is doing – new beginnings, restoration of relationships, and a bringing of wholeness.

This is the new thing God is doing, restoring joy – bringing us to joy and praise. Jesus was the beginning of the new thing. Jesus’ life, death, burial, and resurrection brought about our restoration in faith and reconciliation to God. The ones gathered around that table in Bethany were some of the first to experience the “new” things God was doing through Jesus. Maybe it began with Jesus restoring life to Lazarus, maybe it began with Jesus’ baptism, but God most assuredly started something new in the world through Jesus’ life.

Isaiah gives us the Lord’s words in the scripture we read this morning, 43:18 tells us, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.” Paul mimics that when he writes: “. . . but this one thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Pressing on toward the goal is how we respond to the new thing God is doing. This is where we find our hope and our joy as we look at what God has done for us, restoring the fortunes for God’s chosen ones, the family of God. Forget what lies behind and look toward the cross with joy.

So, how the church responds and how we as members of God’s family should respond is illustrated for us by Mary’s actions. Extravagant, prodigal, outpouring of praise – when Mary anointed Jesus, she was in effect declaring him King, Lord and Savior of her life. She had already acknowledged him as the Messiah, and she made a public showing of her gratitude and joy not only for what Jesus had done for the family but the wholeness she felt through her relationship with him.

Christians should be living joyfully, praising God in their lives, deeds, and words. Even when we are facing difficult times and we lament or cry out in despair, the Christian can hold on to the promise that God is doing something new, working to restore all of creation to God. While that may not always be easy, we can know that “The Lord has done great things” for us and will restore us to wholeness.

² Dennis E. Smith. “Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 12:1-8; Connecting the Reading with Scripture.” *Connections: Year C, Vol. 2. Lent Through Pentecost*. Eds Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2018. Print. 104-106.