

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 13, 2016

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 43:16-21      Psalm 126      Philippians 3:4b-14      John 12:1-8

Can you believe next week is Palm Sunday? We're also still out of step with the pope. The lesson he dealt with this morning in Rome was the woman taken in adultery. You remember the story. Everybody was ready to stone her and Jesus writes in the sand, "*Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.*" And they all walked away.

Well, it's not unlike the gospel we read today in my opinion. We encountered this business in the home of Lazarus (whom Jesus had raised from the dead) and Mary and Martha. Martha, who was working all the time in the kitchen, even in today's gospel served the meal. And Mary, who was very pious and always found at the feet of Jesus, is not only found at his feet today but she is spilling expensive... Have you ever had nard? Let's find out what that's all about. I understand spikenard is something to be smelled and it's pretty beautiful. But she's found at his feet with this perfume, and she's not only spilling it over his feet but - now, get *this*, gang - drying it with her hair! That's in the Bible! You can't convince me that that is not a sexual act. They had towels.

I doubt that it had anything to do with it, but economics became the issue. In the lesson we read today it's Judas Iscariot who says to her, "*Why did you waste all that money? That could have been sold and that money could have been given to the poor.*" That's a hypocrisy beyond reality. And then this elaboration on Judas as a thief. He was the treasurer. He had his hand in the till. He was stealing money. And all of this build-up to the criminalization of Judas about whom I have different ideas, as you know, and so did others throughout the history of the Church. If Judas in fact did what Judas did to fulfill the scripture, was that his fault? What did Judas do that the rest of the twelve didn't do in the end when it came to turning their backs on the Savior, to fleeing. In this wonderful window the little brown spots in the back - falling asleep when he asked them to stay awake to pray. You see them up there? This extraordinary desire to criminalize Judas for the betrayal of Jesus when they all participated in the betrayal - sounds like a presidential campaign, doesn't it. *[laughter]* *It's all their fault. We had nothing to do with it.*

Did you hear Justin Trudeau this week? Do you know who he is? Prime Minister of Canada. I had to look him up on the computer. First of all, I didn't know who he was and, secondly, I thought he was eighteen years old! *[laughter]* He's forty-four. But speaking to a bunch of students in Washington, he outright said to them, "*It is time for us Canadians to pay attention to the first nations, the people who were in this land before we were because now we are waking up to the reality that they might know something about the economy and the ecology which will benefit us after all these years after walking on their faces, taking their land, ignoring their culture - now it's time for us to respect and pay attention to them, their culture, their ideas.*" Astounding stuff!

And I think it's time for us to pay attention to our own tradition, and this story invites attention because this story is told three different times in scripture. It's told once in Matthew and once in Mark as well as in John, and there are differences and they're significant differences. They all occur in Bethany but both Matthew and Mark talk about Jesus visiting not Lazarus who was known to him, Lazarus his best friend, Lazarus over whose grave he wept bitter tears, Lazarus whom he brought back from the dead. In the other two stories Jesus is visiting a man named Simon, a man who has been healed of a very devastating skin disease. Leprosy? Whatever. It didn't have to be a disease of the skin. I think we all know what diseases are and how people treat the afflicted, addicted, those who are different, those who

are strange, those who appear to be contagious. Isn't that what religion was originally all about - keeping your righteous purity intact and not being in touch or communication or in any way threatened by those who were dirtier than I.

Jesus is depicted in these stories as visiting very different people. I suppose Simon with the skin disease might be compared to Lazarus who was raised from the dead because maybe in that culture if you had a disease, an affliction, an addiction you were as good as dead because society wouldn't get near you, and you were expected to announce your presence so that people could flee, so that they could stay pure, stay clean. We all know what happened during the plagues. If you were wealthy enough to have a country home, you escaped. You may know that the northern regions of Manhattan were settled originally when New York was just at the southern end of the island, when people fled to get away from the summer fevers, the yellow fevers and all of that, they moved north of the island. People who had resources could do that.

But here we're faced with these parallel but different stories about Jesus in the company of either very good friends - Mary, Martha and Lazarus - or Simon who was healed of a dreadful skin disease, and a woman who is not named in Matthew or in Mark, a woman who spills this expensive perfume in a very, very, very suggestive manner over Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. A woman without a name in the other two gospels who is asked - now this is what I find interesting - in the one case by the disciples - not Judas - the disciples, and in the other she was asked by some people who were there. It sorts out in John - which is surely a later record - to Judas and blame him and he's a thief and all the rest of it.

What interests me about this story is that in the Matthean account and the Marcan account Jesus says, "*Leave her alone. Leave her alone. Mind your own business.*" I'm sure Jesus said, "*Mind your own **blessed** business.*" I might have said something else. [laughter] "*Leave her alone. The poor you always have with you*" - meaning if you're really concerned about the poor, spend your own money, the stuff that's at the bottom of your pocket. Don't point to her and say her perfume should do your good work by taking care of the poor. If you're concerned about the poor, take care of the poor. You have them there all the time, and you don't have to wait for her perfume to show up for you to take care of the poor. That's hypocrisy. You want to do good work, go right ahead and do it, but leave *her* alone because she is communicating with me in the language, the technique and in the form that she understands. She has come to me.

She's at the feet of Jesus. When you're in trouble, I heard somebody say recently, can you think of a better place to be than at Jesus' feet. And if that's the only language you speak - which is expensive perfume spilled on the feet of someone whose attention you want and whose attention you get by drying it with your hair - "*Leave her alone. Leave her alone.*" And then the Matthean account and the Marcan account say this: "*Every time this story is told, remember her.*" Not Jesus, not the disease - remember *her*. Look to her for an example of humility and sincere worship. Look at her!

The account we read today says nothing about that whatsoever. The account we read today is making it very clear and important that we remember the important people: Jesus' friends, Jesus' real buddies, the people closest to Jesus and that includes Judas and the people who you blame for everything. But don't remember her. She went to Jesus in humility with all that she had and gave it in the way she knew how which was apparently not the right way according to the disciples, the other people, or Judas. She worshiped with what she had in the way she knew. And the point of the story sorts

out, it seems to me, as an instruction for us to remember her. By the time it gets a hundred years into the early Church that message is almost entirely lost. Early on for us in our tradition it becomes a “blame game.” Early on for us in our tradition it becomes a part of those who have a name because they are special friends of Jesus. But the earliest accounts, it seems to me, indicate that it is the nameless, the downtrodden, the poor, the needy, the afflicted, the addicted, the children of God everywhere else in the world who Jesus points to and says, *“When they are at my feet, they are at the right place, and when they are addressing me in the manner they know how they should be allowed to do it and be left alone so that I might be worshiped and have with them a relationship”* which will change not only them but I believe the person of God, God’s self in Jesus. She contributed to him in that moment all that she had. And then as we pay attention to Jesus and what he said and how he lived we realize that how much of all of this matters so little in terms of his real gift to us which is the gift of a loving God and an invitation to relate to that God at all times and in all places and by exploring the reality of relating to God by relating to every other human being in the world. Leave her alone. She’s worshiping. She’s not climbing a ladder of righteousness.

The epistle lesson for today from Philippians: *“For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things.”* This is typical Paul with his inflated sense of himself, but he’s got something to say. *“I have suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”* Here we go. This is the woman. It may be Mary. It may be the slattern. It may be the whore. It may be...who knows who it is, but this is the woman - not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, having not earned a relationship with Jesus, having not been his best friend, having not been the person he raised from the dead, having not been the lovely sisters Mary and Martha who had a wonderful home and invited him to lunch there. Having no righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. And isn’t that what Jesus is saying about her. *“Leave her alone. Look at her. Pay attention to her. Listen to her. She knows her place in terms of my relationship with the world. She’s my daughter. She’s my beloved child. She’s my creation. She’s messed up and she needed to come back home, and she came. She crawled. She spilled the best that she had, and she’s better.”*

And the disciples, some of the people....as I read this lesson, are the ones who are sick because they feel their righteousness comes from something other than humility. They felt their righteousness came as a result of their own good works. They felt their righteousness came from their religiosity. They didn’t feel that their righteousness was God’s gift to them. But the woman who spent her wad and spilled it at feet of Jesus was the one who understood that if there was righteousness for her at all, it was God’s gift to her and that there was nothing she could do to earn or deserve it.

And so she, unlike the others, was - I firmly believe - healed in a way that remained for them to figure out. She pointed at no one. She asked for nobody else’s resources to do her good work. She did what she could in terms of a relationship with the Almighty and she benefitted by being loved, forgiven and used as an example. I doubt, friends, that we can do better than that.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.