

Sermon on John 12:1-8
Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

How do you say thank you? When I was a child, my mother taught me how to call up my grandparents and others who would give me gifts for my birthday and Christmas. As I grew older, she showed me how to write thank you notes. It is perhaps becoming a “lost art” to write thank you notes for gifts we receive, except, perhaps, for graduation and weddings gifts, and other special occasions. I did remember my mother’s lessons and made an attempt to write a note of thanks to everyone who gifted me when I was ordained, and for ordination anniversaries.

How do you thank people who do something kind for you, or give you a gift? Is it a thank you note, or a phone call, or maybe it’s a text message or an email? Some people go to great lengths to say thank you, and get very creative, sending elaborate gifts. Maybe you take a friend out to a nice meal as a way to say thanks. Especially when someone has done something greatly unexpected and kind, or perhaps even saved your life, how do you say “thank you”?

In today’s gospel lesson we see how Mary (the sister of Lazarus) said thank you to Jesus in an extravagant, lavish way, by anointing Jesus’ feet with expensive, sweet-smelling ointment, wiping his feet with her hair. It was a beautiful gesture, loaded with symbolic meaning – anointing the “anointed one” (Jesus) as the Messiah, just days before his arrest, trial and death on a cross. But it was such an extravagant act that it was controversial, and so Mary was criticized for doing it – but not by Jesus – by Judas Iscariot.

But before I say more, a bit of context is in order. Some years we read the story from John’s gospel about the death and raising of Lazarus this fifth Sunday in Lent. You remember him, don’t you? Lazarus was a very close friend and follower of Jesus, along with his sisters, Mary and Martha. They lived in Bethany, which was not far from Jerusalem. Jesus stayed at their house often, and did so before his last visit to Jerusalem, in what became known as Holy Week.

In the previous chapter in John, chapter 11, we read how Lazarus had become ill, and his sisters had sent word to Jesus how serious it was. But Jesus didn’t go immediately to Bethany. He stayed two days longer in the place where he was. When Jesus finally arrived, Lazarus had died, and his sisters, along with the whole town, were gathered at Lazarus’s home to grieve. Lazarus had been in the grave for three days when Jesus got there, and his sisters confronted him about that, in their grief. But they believed that he was the Messiah, and so, when Jesus got to the tomb, he called for Lazarus to come out. And Lazarus came out. He walked out of his tomb, now very much alive, and the people unbound him.

Of course, Lazarus's sisters were overcome with joy and amazement, and news spread throughout the town and to the other villages in the countryside. Many now believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But when the Pharisees and chief priests heard about what Jesus had done, they were worried that such signs would excite the people and force the Roman army to come and destroy them all. So they started looking for Jesus, so that they could arrest him and plotted his death. They also were looking for Lazarus. They wanted to kill him, too. They wondered if Jesus would dare come to Jerusalem, to celebrate the Passover festival?

This is how our story begins today, six days before the Passover, when Jesus came to Bethany to visit the home of Lazarus. Mary and Martha cooked a big thank you dinner for him – Martha served it (of course), and Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Jesus to eat and talk. John tells how Mary took a jar of very precious ointment, which would have cost her 300 denarii, a whole year's wages, and anointed Jesus' feet with this costly perfume. She even wiped his feet with her hair – can you imagine that?! The sweet aroma filled the whole house. It was a beautiful gesture, which in hindsight, is seen by many as having anointed Jesus in preparation for his death and burial, in the coming week. But perhaps it was her way of saying “thank you” to Jesus, for bringing her brother Lazarus back from the dead – a poignant thanks given to someone she worshiped as the Son of God, and loved like her own brother.

Judas Iscariot didn't see it that way. He looked at the way this woman rubbed Jesus' feet – *with her hair!* – and must have been offended in so many different ways. A woman touching Jesus? It just wasn't done! But all he said was “Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor instead?” (In other words, what a waste of good perfume – anointing Jesus' feet!) Judas had totally misinterpreted Mary's act of love, her precious gift, and turned it into an accusation of wasteful excess – when it could have been used in a more practical way. John writes in parentheses: *not that Judas cared about the poor – because he was a thief, who kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.*

So what did Jesus say to all this? He 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.*”

Now, this phrase has often been misinterpreted and misused by Christians, turning it into a statement saying that the poor don't matter so much, or that it is always better to use our resources to worship and honor God than to help those who find themselves in poverty. It's taken by many to be justification to forget about the poor entirely, “because they will always be around”, so they get knocked way down on the list of priorities (even off the list entirely). Which is precisely NOT what Jesus is saying!

Jesus is simply speaking two truths: first, *you will always have people who are poor among you*. This is true – because of the greed and sin of the world, some will have great wealth – billions - meaning that many will become poor as a result. This will always be so – because of our sin of neglect and lack of compassion or justice. There will always be sin, so there will always be injustice, inequity, and poverty – which means many people will unfortunately be poor. Always. This does NOT mean that the poor are not worth considering!

The second truth that Jesus speaks is this: *you will not always have me*. Which is also true. Jesus was about to die. As a human being, he was going to die, and because of the fear and betrayal of many (including one of his own disciples), he would die within the week. So anointing him for burial was appropriate – Mary would anoint him again in death. But because he was also the Son of God, he would rise again. But nobody knew this, so no one understood fully what he meant. It wouldn't become clear until much later, when his disciples looked back, and remembered what had happened, and what Jesus had said, on so many occasions.

So, what do we take from this passage, which took place just before Jesus was arrested and crucified? For one thing, we are coming to that time of year when we focus our attention on the events that led to Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and trial, and ultimately, his death on a cross. We reflect on the compassion he had for his followers from his people, but especially for the many who were considered outcasts, or "second-class" – such as women, Gentiles, lepers, foreigners, sinners, the poor and the sick. He washed the feet of his disciples, he healed the sick, forgave sinners, ate with outcasts and sinners and at the homes of wealthy Pharisees, fed the hungry, and even raised the dead – out of his unsurpassed compassion and love. And he calls you and me to do the same – to love one another, and our neighbors – even our enemies – just as he has loved us! So we reflect on the great compassion God has shown for you and me through the life and death of Jesus, God's dear beloved Son. We give thanks to God for this great love that we have been shown, which gives you and me a second chance, a new life! There are so many ways that you and I can express this thanks to our Lord: we can give thanks through worship, as we sing God's praises and teach our children how to praise; we can take care of this church building and make it a place of beauty – a sacred space for worship and prayer; we can give thanks by loving others in word and deed, feeding those who are hungry, offering shelter for those without homes; we can give thanks by doing the work of proclaiming God's good news outside these doors, out there in the world, and by seeking justice and compassion for all God's children, no matter who they are, no matter how they may be treated like outcasts. For then our praise, our words and acts of love can perhaps be come like

that precious, sweet perfume by which Mary of Bethany anointed the feet of her savior, Jesus, who had raised her brother to life!

Second, we must be very wary about the many messages and actions that conspire to make us neglect injustice, the many inequities in laws, business practices and just plain greed, which make some people rich and too many people poor or struggling financially. We can get so used to seeing people who are homeless or poor, out in the streets, that we don't even see them anymore. Or we get angry at them for being there – instead of being angry at the people who benefit from them being poor, or at the policies and practices that have forced so many into poverty. Thankfully, we have real human beings who live with us, children, their mothers and fathers, who sleep downstairs in this church, who remind us that yes, the poor are always with us – for a month here every year, but every night throughout the year in churches, in emergency shelters, in friend's apartments on the sofa, or sleeping in their cars or walking the streets (or sometimes sleeping in our entry vestibule by the parking lot, or by other entrances where there is a little shelter from the cold or rain. They remind us that what Jesus said is true: the poor are always with us. Because we all have sinned, and fall short of God's glory.

Jesus calls you and me to respond to this truth with words and actions that help care for those who suffer, and speak up to change unjust policies into just ones – such as Paid Family Leave, a minimum living wage, medical care and paid sick and safe time – for everyone. I don't think that we want the words of Judas Iscariot to guide our philosophy around what we do for the poor, nor do we want to misunderstand Jesus, and neglect the poor just because they exist! It is becoming all too common for many people to say “there is no law or reason that says I have to care about those who are poor” – are they ignorant of what Jesus lived and taught? Some want to build more walls, deport people and separate families, and punish the poor for their poverty. Jesus' call to love your neighbor is being lost in all the rhetoric and violence. It is our responsibility, then, as Christians and as the Church, to remind the world and our neighbors what the Bible really says, and what Jesus taught and died for: to love your neighbor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick and release the prisoners – for this is the good news of God! Then our prayers for each other, the poor and the suffering will rise up like sweet-smelling incense to God in heaven, full of compassion and lifting us all as one!

So as the prophet Isaiah reminds us, by sharing the Word of the Lord:
“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...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.” (Isaiah 43)

Thanks be to God for the new life that we have received, through Jesus Christ His Son, our Lord. Amen.