

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Jessica Chambers

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

As Dr. Hartley likes to remind our Worship class, Lent is not just a time for giving things up and taking things on. Lent is a time for fasting, but it is also a time for repentance, self-examination, and preparation for Easter. We tend to be pretty good at the fasting part of Lent. We think of something hard to give up, but doable, and we do our best not to break our fasts. All through Lent we skip dessert, or stop sleeping in, or cut back to just one cup of coffee a day. And then when Easter comes, we go back to desserts, to sleeping in, and to consuming deadly amounts of caffeine. But perhaps we spend so much energy on keeping our fasts that we do not actually examine ourselves or bother to prepare ourselves for Easter. Maybe by trying so hard to be 'good' by not breaking our fasts during Lent, we miss the point altogether.

All four of today's passages acknowledge God's work in the past, but also look forward to God's work that is to come. The Psalm for today remembers fortunes restored to Zion, and then it asks for and expects that again. The Isaiah passage remembers the Exodus, but promises something even greater for Israel in the future. In Philippians, Paul remembers his life following God as a Jew, but then looks ahead to a life with God that acknowledges Jesus as Lord. The Gospel story reminds us that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but also looks ahead to the work of Jesus on the cross. All of these passages ask that we leave something of ourselves behind and press on towards the future.

In today's epistle reading, Paul reminds us of his religious credentials. He was not only a Pharisee who kept the Law blamelessly, but he was born of the tribe of Benjamin; he is as Jewish as it gets. Then, he tells us that he is not really concerned with any of that. His concern is with Jesus as Lord. He says that true righteousness comes not from keeping the Law, but from faith in Jesus. This does not mean that keeping the Law does not matter; he is just saying that if all we are concerned with is doing good things, then we miss the point altogether. What seems to be important here is Jesus' revelation about himself as God. Faith in Jesus requires knowing Jesus, and Paul says that knowing Jesus means sharing in his resurrection; sharing in his resurrection requires that we first become like him. To be like Jesus requires that we participate in his sufferings and become like him in his death. For Jesus to die by the hands of humans is the ultimate expression of his humility. In chapter two of the letter, Paul suggests that to follow in Jesus' example requires a love that puts others before oneself. In the same chapter, he reminds us that Jesus did not exploit his equality with God; instead he "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Our response to Jesus' revelation of himself to us should be the same extravagant love and humble obedience that we see in Jesus.

The story in John that we read for today is a perfect example of humility and extravagant love. This story is found in all four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place this story in the house of Simon the Leper and none of them give a name for the woman, but only refer to her as 'a woman' or 'a sinful woman.' The details of John's story are different, and that tells us something. In a show of extravagant love, Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, and now they are presumably in Lazarus' home. John names Mary, Lazarus' sister, as the woman who anoints Jesus. Everything about Mary's actions here are out of the ordinary. It was custom in the Ancient Near East for a guest's feet to be washed when they enter a home, but by a servant, never the host. And Mary does not only wash Jesus' feet; she anoints them – and with the costliest of perfumes, at that. Kings and other royalty are anointed, not mere guests, and anointing is for the head, not the feet. Furthermore, she takes down her hair. If this were first century Israel, you all would have gasped at such scandalous behavior. Women never let their hair loose in public. Even if a woman were to let her hair down in her home (and not all women would have), she never would have done so in front of a guest or a man who was not her husband.

Under any normal circumstances, these things that Mary does would have been incredibly shameful acts. She lowers herself from the place of dignified host to that of servant. She lets down her hair and touches it to a man's feet. Given the culture, anyone would have been right to rebuke her. Furthermore, she seemingly wastes a perfume worth a year's wages that could have been sold for the benefit of the poor. Even if Judas' motives are not pure, he seems right in his accusation; this 'waste' seems to directly conflict with Jesus' consistent teaching to serve the poor. If we, like Judas, think Mary should not have used this costly perfume, we are missing the point altogether. These are no ordinary circumstances. Jesus has, once more, revealed himself to be God in the extravagantly loving act of raising Lazarus. Mary is responding to this revelation, to the knowledge of who Jesus is, with extravagant love and humility. She is not behaving shamefully or wastefully, but rather she is being like Jesus. She humbles herself to the status of servant and does so at great cost to herself.

I tend to think that I am pretty humble. I openly admit to being a terrible person and I will gladly point out most of my own flaws. Admitting one's shortcomings, however, is not all that humility is. Humility requires that we are willing to give up any claims to status or any protection we have from shame or discomfort with who we are and who Jesus is. Humility requires a willingness to accept and to give extravagant love.

I do not have any great status to boast about like Paul, and no one cares if I let my hair down like Mary. My protection is a series of carefully laid out defenses that protect me from being vulnerable, my favorite of which is humor. Humor has a lot of functions, but not all of them are good. I make a joke of love. I am utterly unwilling to openly give and receive love. I joke that I don't have feelings or that in place of a heart, I have nothing. I make a joke of it so that I don't have to feel exposed and so that I can keep my pride. I don't remember the last time I told anyone that I loved them. I rarely directly let anyone know that I care about them; it is always indirect or somehow secret so that I can pretend that is not what I mean. In reality, the people

that I love, I love a great deal. I love them so much that I am afraid of telling them, because if I love them more than they love me, then it's awkward and I am uncomfortable and I feel ashamed. To be humble, however, requires that I set aside my defenses and realize that peoples' need for extravagant love is more important than protecting myself from discomfort or shame.

I have heard it said, a few times, that to associate oneself with St. Paul's is to sort of put a black mark on oneself. I have also heard it said that this means we are doing something right, but I am not entirely convinced, because my initial reaction, and what seems to be a common reaction is to get immediately defensive and point out that the most theologically educated people go to St. Paul's or we defend our worship style or whatever it is that we feel is under attack with the claim. But I am just not sure we are being terribly humble when we defend ourselves in this way. Maybe instead of getting defensive, we should figure out why it is that people think this, and go from there. I am not at all sure of what I think it means for St. Paul's to be humble or to love extravagantly. But it probably is not protecting ourselves from discomfort or shame by becoming defensive.

For the remainder of this time of self-examination and preparation that we call Lent, maybe we ought to be figuring out what it means for us to humble ourselves to the extent that Jesus does – both as individuals and as a church. Maybe we ought to be figuring out what it means to love others extravagantly without regard for our own protection. When Easter comes, our tendency is to forget about Lent, but why would we spend so much time examining and preparing just to leave it all behind? These passages do ask us to leave something behind and look forward to what is to come, but we often leave behind the wrong thing. Rather than forget about Lent, Paul reminds us that what we need to leave behind are our defenses and our claims to greatness; we trade those for humility and extravagant love. If we do not carry with us into the next season what we learn in this season, maybe we are missing the point altogether.