

Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14

Writing to Christians in Philippi, Paul admits that his heritage and reputation could give him more reason than most people to place confidence in his spiritual pedigree. But the overwhelming grace of God in Jesus calls Paul to a new set of values.

[Paul writes:] ^{4b}If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: John 12:1-8

Judas willfully misinterprets as waste Mary's extravagant act of anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume. Jesus recognizes that her lavish gift is both an expression of love and an anticipation of his burial.

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

“Go in peace. Remember the poor.” And we say what: “Thanks be to God.” Now that was not said so that you can start gathering your belongings to head out, there is more to come yet today. But this is the sending dismissal statement we have been using as a congregation at the conclusion of our worship in this season of Lent. “Go in peace. Remember the poor.”

Now if you are poor, you can say that’s probably not going to be a big problem, you often feel stuck in the challenge of making your resources work, so it’s not too hard to remember the situation or that one is poor. If we do not consider ourselves to be poor, on the other hand, maybe we can often say, “remember the poor”, “got it”; “I won’t forget.” But remembering the poor in this sending statement is not simply about having a mental thought, it is one that is directing us as disciples of Jesus to words, deeds and actions. It is a call to leave worship and enact what God is calling us to be about as we seek to live out our faith.

In our Gospel text today, we have the act of Jesus’s feet getting anointed by Mary with an expensive perfume. Jesus has now journeyed closed to Jerusalem, about a week ahead of things, just like we are today in the timeline. This is the final resting spot, on the threshold of all things breaking loose. We are told that he is invited to be the guest of honor with some of his closest friends. These friends’ names are familiar to us. Not only do they apparently include all the disciples, but also the names of the hosts: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We are told Lazarus, whose house they are in, is present, and this is on the heels of him being raised from the dead. Martha, the one who is famous for doing all the busy work when Jesus visited before, while her sister sat down at the feet of Jesus, is at it again in a way, as the text says she is the one who served them all. Mary,

who sat at the feet of Jesus when he first came there, does something different concerning those same feet. We are told that she brings out this container of pure nard and pours it on the feet of Jesus and then wipes it with her hair. We are told that the fragrance filled the entire house. When those who were around reacted, in what apparently turned into an awkward or even uncomfortable situation, we are told they are somewhat aghast and even indignant; particularly we are told that the rascal Judas has something to say. Jesus responds to diffuse this situation by saying: “Leave her alone. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

“You always have the poor with you” ... so there it is ... what’s the point of trying to fix something, if Jesus says it is always going to be there? Comedian Steven Wright has a line about his childhood. He says: “I once heard that ‘practice makes perfect,’ but then later I heard that ‘no one’s perfect’; so, ... I quit practicing. There are some people who interpret the response of Jesus, to say that because Jesus says there will always be poor people, it really doesn’t matter what we do. This has actually been a practice of some Christians in their teachings! It seems that this interpretation would ignore the many other teachings and things that Jesus says and does concerning the poor of this world.

In this episode, as it unfolds in the house of one of Jesus’ closets friends, Jesus is not saying forget the poor. He is not establishing a policy of practice for any government, any organization, any denomination, any follower of the faith. Jesus is simply pointing to a moment in time. A moment when a follower recognizes Christ’s presence in her midst and performs an act of love. We do not know fully her motivations for doing this. Maybe it was an act of appreciation for Jesus bringing her brother back to life; maybe it was an act of respect for all the love and care he had

shown; maybe it was because she had been listening to the words of Jesus, and his talk of his impending death and she wanted to do something that demonstrated she was hearing him; maybe it was a premonition that things were going to radically change; maybe it was an act of pure love. Regardless of our full understanding, we are told that she had previously bought the ointment in preparation for his death. However, something moved her in the moment to perform this act when the opportunity presented itself. She wanted to do it while he was still alive.

It is amazing sometimes, how humanity wants to find excuses and blame for the problem of poverty. We often assume that it is their fault, like last week when we heard about the prodigal son. They are too wasteful, they are not following the code, they are not doing what is culturally acceptable. Jesus saying, that the poor will always be with us, is not a statement for inaction, it probably is more a recognition of humanity's brokenness in sharing resources that unfortunately he knows is likely to continue.

When we include "Go in peace. Remember the poor," in our liturgy, it is not saying make sure you are thankful for all you got. It is instead a call to action and outlook in this life. "Remember," as we use it in this way implies that we are seeking to keep this in our vantage point as we strive to be servants, disciples, and witnesses of the Gospel message. For often is it our lack of response, our lack of remembering, or lack of discipleship that causes us to ignore "neighbor justice" and focus on a worldview that says: "the one with the most toys wins."

There are certainly times when we feel helpless in all of this. We certainly know that there are systemic issues with poverty. However, we

also know that we often fall short and are in need of forgiveness ourselves, we are in need of healing.

Today as part of our service we recognize this. This is not only an act of healing for our woundedness, it is also an act of healing for our brokenness. As we stand a week away of the events of Holy Week that lead to Jesus' death, in a way, we, like Jesus, are being anointed ahead of time. With feet and head anointed, we are preparing ourselves, we are packing for our spiritual journey, the challenges and comforts, alike for the final trek into Jerusalem.

Today's act is also a time for other types of healing. This is not a healing practice that promises us 100% result or comes with any type of guarantee. Rather it is a tangible, hands on, practice of recognizing that we are often hurting, and we invite God into this brokenness to soothe us, to heal us, to comfort us - often in ways that we often cannot imagine, as well as in those ways in which we pray for, so that in our discomfort and agitation, we may experience the presence of God.

So, at your own discretion, you may choose to come forward to receive a blessing and an anointing of oil; to invite God's wholeness into your life, to remind you of your center, to remind you that God is present in your joys and sorrows; to remind you that God cares deeply for each one of us, rich and poor alike, and to hold out Savior's promise of a wholeness, that we cannot even imagine. Perhaps you do not want to come forward for this - this too is okay too. We can still use this time in prayer, or in silence, to invite God into things we are wrestling with the most. The things that detract from our center, the things that are dominating our mental, social, emotional, and physical well-being. In our praising God and serving others, may we continually ask God to enrich us on this journey and may

we see in God a presence that, amidst our brokenness, amidst our humanity, claims us fully. Amen.