

Ekklesia

April 11, 2019



David Gilbert celebrates this spring's flourishing azalea blooms.

Sunday Worship

We have mixed feelings as we approach this coming Sunday, the third-to-the-last of our services at Grace Covenant. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that the service will be one of celebration, accompanied by the dark shadows soon to come. According to tradition, we will begin the service with a celebration of palms and hallelujahs, but as the service progresses, we will turn our eyes toward the downward spiral of events we call "Holy Week." If we are alert to the situation of that first Palm Sunday, however, ominous signs are everywhere. Contrary to John's depiction of Jesus as a triumphant king taking command of the city, Luke makes no mention of palms, hosannas, or cut branches, all of which have political, nationalistic overtones. Also different from the masses John paints turning out to welcome Jesus, Luke makes it clear that those singing praise are followers of Jesus who are entering the city at his side. And then only one step from that "triumphal" entry, Jesus looks out over the city and weeps. "Would that even today," he cries, "you knew the things that make for peace" (19:41).

Sunday, we will share in the joy we associate with Palm Sunday, but we will also share Jesus' anguished words over the coming devastation of the beloved city. In the tradition of Israel's prophets, Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is, in the words of Fred Craddock, "a voice of love and profound caring, of vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss, of tough hope painfully releasing the object of its hope, . . . of accepted loss but with energy enough to go on" [Interpretation: Luke, 229]. Join us Sunday as we seek to learn more about this "tough hope" that has the energy to go forward, even in and particularly in the face of disappointment. "What," we will ask, "does such hope ask of us?" –Text: Luke 19:28-48.

Prayer Concerns

Available to members.

Wednesday Dinner: Prepared

Next Wednesday's dinner will be prepared for everyone. Plan to come and enjoy the fun.

listen closely. I don't want to see four versions of this." Today's text makes the point.

Found in all four Gospels, the anointing of Jesus appears to be on a level with other crucial moments in the Gospels like the feeding of the multitude and the crucifixion. But the anointing stories vary significantly. Luke's account is so different that some have questioned whether it is the same story, and others have counted as many as three anointings. Luke's nameless woman is identified as a sinner, wrongly attributed to Mary Magdalene, the mythical prostitute. We might note that the legend of Mary Magdalene has no support in the Gospels and that Mary of Bethany is not Mary Magdalene. Luke's focus is on forgiveness, the disciples are not mentioned and possibly not present. The only other character in the story and critic of the woman's act of anointing is the host, Simon the Pharisee.

Matthew appears to have edited Mark's story. Mark and Matthew also name the host as Simon, but identify him as the leper, not the Pharisee. The critical witnesses of the extravagant waste are unnamed, but Matthew identified the critics as the disciples, and Mark just writes that "some" were angry. In Mark and Matthew Judas makes a brief appearance after the anointing, arranging with the chief priests to betray Jesus. Are you sufficiently confused?

Real love can be legitimately extravagant. One consistent message comes through in the different Gospel views of the same story. In response to the critical judgment of the witnesses, Jesus affirms an act of extravagant love. John agrees that the location is Bethany; but the woman is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus; and the dinner is in their home, following the chapter on the raising of Lazarus. Placed between the raising of Lazarus and the washing of disciples' feet, John's anointing is prelude to Jesus' death, and like Mark and Matthew, it is preparation for burial. The extravagance of love is in the death of Jesus on the cross to which Mary responds in an extravagant act of anointing with expensive perfume.

"The Gift of the Magi" is an O'Henry short story about Della and Jim, a young couple struggling with the financial limits of early marriage. Despite their poverty they had two precious possessions, Della's long beautiful hair and Jim's pocket watch handed down from his grandfather. On Christmas Eve, Della is desperate to find a gift for Jim, but she only has \$1.87. After a good cry Della decides to go shopping anyway and comes upon a sign "Mrs. Sofronie. Hair Articles of all Kinds," and Della decides to sell her beautiful long hair for \$20. Then she rushes out to find the perfect gift, a gold chain for Jim's prized pocket watch, \$21. Looking like a school boy with cropped hair, Della prepares dinner and waits by the door with the chain in her hand. Jim is late coming home, but he stops short in the door, shocked by the sight of Della's short hair. Jim reassured Della, "Nothing like a haircut could make me love you any less. But if you'll open that, you may know what I felt when I came in." His gift for Della was two ornamental combs for her hair that she had long admired but could not afford. Assuring Jim that her hair grows fast, Della shows Jim the gold chain which she purchased by selling her hair. Then Jim sat down and smiled. He had sold his watch to buy the combs.

O'Henry's epilogue explains this story of extravagant love: the magi, "wonderfully wise men," were the first to give Christmas gifts to the newborn Christ-child, but "Of all who give gifts, these two were the most wise. . . . Everywhere they are the wise ones. They are the magi." The anointing of Jesus appears in all four Gospels with significant variations; but all four accounts have one common thread, similar to O'Henry's Christmas story—extravagant love.

A feature story on yesterday's news was about a woman who had to have a kidney transplant in order to live, and a friend stepped up to donate the gift of life and, by chance, she was a tissue match. In John's Gospel Jesus tells his disciples that no greater love has anyone than to lay down his life for his friends. And, Jesus follows after the extravagant love of Mary to wash the feet of his disciples in the next chapter.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* wrote of the costly grace of God in Christ: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Bonhoeffer wrote during the peak of Hitler's atrocities and the corruption of a church that had sold its soul to stay close to the seat of power. Bonhoeffer started a new church, the confessional church that had to go underground to exist. He reminds us, nothing about the cross or the work of redemption should be put on the sale table as "cheap grace." Cheap grace is a fraud: the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, and Communion without confession. Love for the world exacted an immeasurable price on the God of redemption. The same grace of God is also visible in disciples who take up the cross to follow Christ. The cross stands at the center—at the center of the saving grace of God and at the center of the Christian life.

The call to sacrifice is valid and beautiful. If you have experienced love in your life, I dare say that you have experienced sacrificial giving that exceeds expectations or contracts, but also exceeds the ability to measure in monetary value. Especially in our capitalist world of commerce and profit, we tend to make dollars the measure love often at the expense of the people at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Real love exceeds the value of money. I suspect that Christians have missed the point throughout Christian history. The magnificent cathedrals that dot the landscape of Europe often cast shadows on dire poverty and human suffering far in excess of the claims of benefit that go into the building of religious monuments. Martin Luther's primary complaint with the papacy was in sending out the agent Tetzel to sell indulgences to the poor people in his parish. He was offended by the commercialization and distortion of the gospel of Christ. Indulgences were tokens of forgiveness for future sins accompanied by the ditty, "when a coin in

the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” I stay offended with the persistent fund-raising of the TV evangelists living in luxury in multi-million dollar mansions, suggesting that this is what God demands. The prosperity gospel has become the most crass corruption of Christianity in recent history.

I have to confess to some personal disagreement with the typical way the story of Mary’s extravagance is interpreted in conflict with numerous other places in the Gospel. Perhaps my disagreement is with the Gospels themselves and the inconsistent application of money to situations. For example, I recall a big fund-raising event in a church that I served as a student in Baylor University. A rather wealthy widow in the church stood up to declare that she could give “the widow’s mite,” which in Luke amounts to a few pennies. After the service, the pastor growled in private that the widow in Luke gave everything she had. Ms. Smith’s pennies were not close to the widow’s mite. Luke measures giving by mites, but the issue is sacrifice, not monetary value.

Real love can be legitimately practical. John alone makes Judas the critic of Mary’s extravagance. John alone explains that Judas is the treasurer who cared nothing for the poor and explains that he was a thief, protecting the purse to enrich himself. We might note that John is probably the last Gospel to be written—at least two decades after the others. By the time of John’s Gospel, Judas has been thoroughly demonized, the unfortunate scapegoat on which the disciples pour their own guilt. We have extended the blame game over nearly twenty centuries of demonizing a man who is no longer around to defend himself. We have also unloaded on the Jews, mistakenly attributing the crucifixion of Jesus to a demonized Judaism.

I find myself in limited sympathy with Judas. Many interpreters have taken note of the evolution of demonizing Judas that can be traced in the Gospels. A popular notion is that Judas more than the others was ready to die for the gospel. He was a real revolutionary indicated by the name Iscariot that could be linked to the dagger carried by assassins of the Romans, the Zealots. The scenario is that Judas was acting to set the revolution in motion, like Judas Maccabeus, to gain political independence and bring in the new kingdom. When it backfired, and Jesus was crucified, his remorse overwhelmed him. He committed suicide to become the scapegoat of history, bearing the sins of the others out into the wilderness of death.

Maybe John was right about Judas the treasurer who was embezzling the disciple’s purse, but I cannot count the number of times I have heard someone quote “we always have the poor” to justify centering attention on our selfish and often wasteful luxuries. Matthew’s last Judgment passage focuses on loving Jesus in the poor,” If you have done it for the least of these, you have done it for me.”

Presbyterian seminary professor Theodore Wardlaw raised an interesting question, “Has Judas Died for Our Sins?” (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2017, p. 15ff.) He wrote that for all these years we have made a scapegoat of Judas along with many of our brothers who are just like him, and we have missed the point of the gospel. If we don’t see Judas as our brother, we miss the essence of redemption. We lose both the essence of our humanity and the profound experience of God’s love.

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c/o Grace Covenant Church
320 Robertsville Road, Suite 2
Oak Ridge, TN 37830

www.GraceCovenantOakRidge.net