

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 21, 2010

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

Isaiah 43:16-21

{16} Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, *{17}* who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: *{18}* Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. *{19}* 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. *{20}* The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, *{21}* the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Psalm 126

{1} When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. *{2}* Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." *{3}* The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. *{4}* Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. *{5}* May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. *{6}* Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Philippians 3:4b-14

{4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: *{5}* circumcised 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; *{6}* as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. *{7}* Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. *{8}* More 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 *{9}* and 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. *{10}* I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, *{11}* if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. *{12}* Not 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. *{13}* Beloved, 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, *{14}* I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

John 12:1-8

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

Last week we heard the parable of the "Prodigal Son" and I commented that it is pointless to try to make any sense out of the apparently foolishly reckless actions of the father character. If this is a story about grace, as I believe it is, then rather than trying to understand or figure it out, the best (and only thing) thing we can do is to celebrate it. Let it be. Be part of what God is "up to" in the world and in our lives. In some ways the parable is

very much like how we interact with great works of art. In the long run, the best thing we can do is simply make ourselves available and allow it to “happen” in and to us.

Despite the fact that today’s rather strange Gospel story comes from a different author and book, I think this is also the best approach to it as well.

It is very tempting (and I did come across all these things in my preparation) to become sidetracked on some of the particulars of this story like: “Where did the perfume come from?”, “How could they possibly afford it?”, “First century women’s hair styles”, or even “Seating customs in the first century Ancient Near East”. Would any of this really help? Might it actually be a way to avoid a potentially uncomfortable reality behind this story?

Most of us know and remember the story of the raising of Lazarus, which happens to form all of chapter eleven in St. John’s Gospel. That being the case, I think it is fair to say that Mary, Martha, and especially Lazarus, had been given an unimaginable gift.

Today’s text doesn’t actually tell us anything about what any of those three people were thinking or feeling during the dinner party. It is clear, however, that Mary’s actions were tender, poignant, and to say the least, extravagant. I can’t help but think she was simply caught up in and swept away by an overwhelming sense of love and gratitude. No calculation, no measuring, no restraint, no reserve, no stopping to figure it out, no real plan, no ulterior motive. Pure, unfettered love and overflowing gratitude.

This story is probably quite wise to simply let Mary’s strange and disconcerting actions stand without any comment. In this case, words would only get in the way. We are privileged to be invited into that sacred moment as witness, not as voyeurs. Let it “happen” in and to us.

Here’s what I see as the point. When it comes to our relationship with God and our response to what God is doing in and through Jesus, it is simply pointless and foolish to somehow try to measure out or quantify love and gratitude, either our own or anyone else’s. Let it be.

We are certainly not being asked in this story to do the exact same thing in the exact same way as Mary. This isn’t a “recipe” or “method”. Think of it as a gentle invitation.

Get caught up in pure love and overflowing gratitude, whatever that looks like for you.

“How shall I repay the LORD for all the good things God has done for me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. (Psalm 116: 12-13)

AMEN.