

Sunday April 7th, 2019

Lent V

PRAYER: O Christ, take hold of us! If we have fallen to the ground, lift us up. If we have lost sight of the finish, point the way. Grasp our hands and pull us forward, seize our spirits and urge them on; show us the course, and we will press toward the goal, toward the prize of our high calling as your people. Amen.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: “O people of all nations of the earth, ascribe great strength and glory to His name! Yes, ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name! Bring an offering and come before Him.” (1 Chronicles 16:28, 29)

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: To the children of faith, God has said in Isaiah 44:22, “I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like a mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.” Let us accept the acts of God on our behalf and return into fulness of fellowship with Him.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O eternal God, how often we worship you and how little we understand you:

You, who makes the first to be last and the last to be first;
You, who frees the slave and enslaves the free;
You, who makes wealth to be poverty and poverty, wealth;
You, who chides the pious and feasts with the faithless;
You, who makes foe to be friend and friend to be foe;
You, who brings the outsider in and turns the insider out;
You, who makes success to be failure and failure, success-

You are the God who calls us-a right side up people-to become your upside-down kingdom. You call us to be embodiments of a revolution in values, a revolution in which the power of love deposes the glory of our ambition, in which the freedom of grace breaks our bondage to greed. How you would love us, by changing our world!

We ask your forgiveness, Lord. For though you desire our conversion to a different world, we would rather preserve the world we sit in. Though you desire us to defend the least among us, we would rather admire the greatest. Though you desire us to serve you faithfully at all times and in all places, we would rather confine our faith to the services in our sanctuaries. Though you desire us to become your upside-down people, we would rather climb the ladder of right-side-up living.

O God, if only we could say with the Apostle Paul that we count all gain as loss for your sake. If only we could offer all that we have, and all that we are, in the service of all that you would have us become. If only we could realize that to be baptized is to be turned around, transformed, transfigured; to be made a new creature, with eyes to see rightly, new ears to hear wisely, new lips to speak truly, new minds to think clearly, new hearts to love greatly; to begin to discern what right and wise and true and clear and great might mean, in the life of radical faith.

If only!

We confess our difficulty in discerning your values Lord. When your revelation comes, it is neither easily perceived nor wholeheartedly received. Even when Christ appears, revealing your values in body and soul, we cannot agree upon his identity. We hesitate to recognize him, refuse to acknowledge him: His words are too harsh, his ways too hard.

Sunday April 7th, 2019

Lent V

He is one of us, yet so unlike us: he offends and confronts, he disrupts and disputes, he defies and demands, and he loves-O God how he loves!

Such scandal, this love for sinners! Such shame, this love for enemies! Such disgrace, this love for outcasts!

If only!

O Lord, stand our values on their head, if they are not your values. We are capable of becoming upside-down for your sake, but we are not strong. Send your spirit into our very bones, into the sinew of our flesh, into the substance of our souls; make us burn with the fire of compassion, with the flame of conviction, with the light of zeal!

Then we shall finally understand you whom we worship, and we shall begin to be what we begun to understand:

We will make first to be last and the last to be first;

We will free the slave and enslave the free;

We will make wealth to be poverty and poverty, wealth;

We will chide the pious and feast with the faithless;

We will make foe to be friend and friend to be foe;

We will make success to be failure and failure, success-

We will be your upside-down people, the embodiments of your revolution in values. And, oh, how we will love you! How we will serve you-by changing ourselves, by changing our world!

BENEDICTION: May the Lord make a way for you through the wilderness and bring you together into the promised land, that your mouth might be filled with laughter, and your tongue with shouts of joy!

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Lent V

John 12:1-8

“Something is Rotten in Bethany”

Crazy Pete, as his friends called him, was one of the very best salespeople his company had ever employed. Crazy Pete had sold more products to more unlikely customers than anyone in the history of his company. Pete was successful because he was always looking for unsuspecting people to sell his wares to. In his drive for more sales, Pete headed off to Israel, and the Negev desert, in search of more sales.

He rented a car and started out traveling from one village to the next making as many sales as he could. Suddenly, as he was driving about, he noticed what looked like a body in the ditch at the side of the road. Never to pass up an opportunity, and despite the overbearing heat, Crazy Pete, got out of his air-conditioned rental car and quickly went to check on the man.

The man was still alive but obviously in great distress. Pete took the man in his arms and the man whispered through parched and cracked lips, “Water, please. Water!” “Are you in luck”, Pete said “Why in my carrying case I happen to have the most beautiful silk neck ties this side of Jerusalem. Normally thirty-five dollars each, but for you twenty-two dollars and fifty cents.”

“Water, please; just water” gasped the man. “I’ll tell you what. Since you are a nice guy, I’ll make it two ties for thirty-five dollars-that’s for polysilk blend, though, I have to tell you.” “Water, sir; please give me some water” the man pleaded. “You drive a hard bargain.” Pete shook his head regretfully. “Okay, any necktie you want for sixteen dollars and fifty cents-but I can’t go any lower.”

“Water, I only want water” the dying man’s words now barely audible. “Oh, it is water you want. Why didn’t you say so? Well, you’re in luck again. Just over that sand dune is a lovely resort, I have stayed there myself. They have all the water you can drink.” And with that, Pete laid the man back down, got in his car and drove away.

Somehow the man managed to find enough strength to get up, and stagger to the top of the next sand dune, and sure enough, he saw a neon-lit sign La Club Gaza a short distance away. The man summoned every last ounce of his strength and crawled across the burning sand to the entrance, and then collapsed at the front door. “Water, please somebody give me some water!”

“Ah, you want water,” said the doorman sympathetically. “We have all kinds: mineral water, well water, club soda, Perrier, seltzer. Only thing is, you have to have (you guessed it) a tie to get in.” Seriously now, with or without a tie; are you thirsty? I mean really parched. The scriptures tell us that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied. (Matthew 5:6) Actually, those were words Jesus used; words that speak to a hunger and a thirst to draw close to God, and in doing so becoming more Christ like.

Sunday April 7th, 2019

Lent V

Are you thirsty? Are you hungry? Do you want to meet and be near to God? Do you want to know Christ? Maybe that is why you came today. It does seem a reasonable expectation to think that if we hunger and thirst for God, we should come to the one place where spiritual water and food should be in abundance.

Then how come when we come to the one place supposedly where water flows freely, we feel like we are missing the key to quenching our parched souls? It is maybe not a poly-silk tie we are missing but do you ever feel like you are standing in the midst of, or hearing about all this living water, but you haven't got a cup to catch it? Do you ever feel like the woman at the well in John chapter 4?

She listens to Jesus talk about living water springing forth, ending thirst forever, and she replies, "Please sir, give me some of that water. Then I will never thirst again and I will never have to come here to haul water." (John 4:15) "Water, water, everywhere is water, but not a drop to drink." Is this how you feel today?

Our thirst might be perpetuated by the fact that we are confused by what worship is supposed to be theoretically, and what our actual experience has been. Maybe we have seen or heard of others who seem to be swimming in the very presence of God, and we wonder why we are floundering in the desert? Could it be that we have lost our way when it comes to worship?

Somewhere along the way we have lost sight of the fact that worship, true worship, is one of the most dangerous things we do. You see, most of us think worship is safe; at least in this country. Although in other places, going to worship is dangerous. You come for an hour, and only an hour please and thank you. We say a few words, sing a few hymns, listen, make an offering, and go home. We do this so routinely, that worship rarely changes us or challenges us.

Did I sum things up pretty well? I wonder; is what we do really worship? Now before you get worried, I am not talking about the whole debate about whether we worship in traditional ways or contemporary ways. True worship has little to do with where, or what style we use to worship. Real worship has everything to do with us, and quite honestly, we take a huge risk every Sunday in being dishonest in our worship. We run the risk of coming before our creator in a disguise.

We are tempted every week to come before God, not as we truly are, but as we want others to see us. Now compare our approach to God with that of Mary of Bethany in John 12. Mary was so open in her devotion to Christ that she literally scandalized everyone in the room. Everyone that is, except Jesus himself. This story of worship takes place not in a temple, but in a home at a dinner party.

In fact, this is Mary and Martha's home that they shared with their brother Lazarus. We read that Mary took a jar, about a pint or twelve ounces in size, of very expensive perfume and she poured it out on Jesus' feet. We read that the whole room was filled with the fragrance, so it is assumed she used every drop, she held nothing back.

Sunday April 7th, 2019

Lent V

Mary's act was one of worship prompted by gratitude because Jesus had just raised Lazarus. The very posture of Mary, describes someone at worship. She is at Jesus' feet. She is kneeling and she is in a posture of submission. It was usually the servant of the house that washed and perfumed guests, but Mary readily takes on this task in her own home. However, we know servants normally use towels to dry feet, but Mary undoes her hair and uses that to dry Jesus feet.

In Jesus' day, a woman's hair was her glory, and a woman never undid her hair publicly and never to anyone, save her husband. This is an act of brazen boldness and intimacy that shocked; no, scandalized everyone in the room including her own brother. John is very blunt here that Mary's act was risky, intimate, and was a kind of "naked" devotion to Christ. Everyone in that room was offended, except of course Jesus himself.

And no one was more offended than Judas. John records forever the indignant and angry response of Judas. What, pray tell, has got Judas so angry? Is it because Mary let down her hair? No, he objects to the waste of perfume because of its cost. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." You know Judas makes a good point. It is hard to argue with him. But Judas wears a disguise. He is not being honest. He doesn't care about the poor. He doesn't care about Jesus.

John tells us he only cares about money, and he was a thief. The devotion of Judas to Jesus is a masquerade. It seems like the height of rudeness to criticize Mary, and really what business is it of Judas what Mary does. That is a question I really wrestled with until I ran across something very interesting this week. A scholar by the name of Sanders points out that Judas was the son of a man named Simon. John 6:71

In the other gospels, this story, with some differences, takes place in the house of a man named Simon the leper. Sanders speculates that perhaps; this home of Lazarus is one in the same as Simon the Leper. Could it be that Judas was so bold, because this was his home, and maybe Lazarus and Mary and Martha are his family? If this is true, it makes the pain of Judas' rebuke sting all the more.

Judas' problem though arises out of his motivation. He was angry he couldn't get a piece of that wealth Mary poured out on Jesus. Judas rejected Mary's worship, because he couldn't get any personal benefit out of it. Judas was joined by the others in the room who deemed Mary's act wasteful, because no one benefited by it, except perhaps Jesus. Mary gave herself to this act: sacrificing wealth, decorum, and risking rebuke.

She didn't want anything in return. All she wanted to do was honour Jesus who was after all the guest of honour at this party. Notice verse nine which reads, "Meanwhile, a large crowd of Jews found out Jesus was there and came, not only because of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead." In other words, the party is for Jesus, but most people came for someone else. That can be true of our worship as well.

In fact, most of the "worship wars" over issues of music and style, arise because people base their judgments on what is valuable in worship on what personal gain they receive.

Sunday April 7th, 2019

Lent V

If we get something out of it, then it was “good” worship. If I don’t get anything out of it, then it is lame worship. Let us be honest, that such a perspective is entirely self-centered.

It takes God, and everyone else out of the equation. It does not follow Mary’s example. Others take a different tack. We evaluate worship based on numerical growth. We argue for change based on what draws a crowd. Does it suit the market? Is it competitive with what other churches offer? I suppose this is better than the first approach of what I personally like, because it takes into account others preferences.

However, it is still human-centered, rather than God centered. So, for years we have echoed Judas and the rest in that house in Bethany, by leaving the presence of Christ with the same questions, “What did I get out of that? Or What did the church gain from that?” No wonder we are so thirsty. Mary’s example tells us we’ve got it all wrong. Worship isn’t about what we get from Christ; although often we do receive blessings.

Worship is always, and foremost, about offering something to Christ. Let me be forthright with you in stating that I think that true worship is not about what I take away with me when I walk out the door. True worship is really all about what I leave at the feet of Jesus.

Marva Dawn has described worship as “a royal waste of time.” “Royal” in the sense that it is one of the ways we participate in the Kingdom of God. A “waste”, in the sense that we must; “die to ourselves and our egos, our purposes and our accomplishments” in the process. There is always then an element of extravagance in true worship. An element, as like with Mary, of not holding anything back.

That doesn’t mean we approach Christ with open hearts but empty minds. Mary’s act seemed reckless, especially to Judas and those sitting around the table, but there was also purpose in what she did. Jesus said in her defense, “Leave her alone. She did it in preparation for my burial.” Mark makes the point even clearer in his version, “She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.” (Mark 14:8)

At this point in the Gospel story, Mary seems to be the only one to have grasped the certainty of Christ’s coming death. She alone realizes how little precious time there is left with Jesus; so, she seizes the moment, despite any and all reaction by observers. John is clearly telling us that even in the midst of her extravagant worship, Mary is the only one who sees the bigger picture of who and what Jesus is all about.

Perhaps that is why we are thirsty before, during and after our times of worship. We have taken our eyes off the only one who can quench our thirst. Perhaps worship has for us become more about me, than about the one who is “The Resurrection and the Life”. Perhaps we care more about what others think, or the world thinks, than what Jesus thinks. Eugene Peterson, the scholar behind the popular bible translation *The Message*, once offered these words of warning about prayer: “Be slow to pray.

Sunday April 7th, 2019

Lent V

Prayer”, he goes on to say, “most often doesn’t get us what we want, but what God wants-something at variance with what we conceive to be in our best interests. And when we realize what is going on, it is too late to go back. Be slow to pray.”

He could have said the very same thing about worship in general. Be slow to worship. Be careful about it. Don’t rush into it without considering what you are doing. Worship is not for the faint of heart. It should not be entered into carelessly. The aim of worship is not to get what we want, but what God wants. And sometimes, by God’s grace, that is exactly what happens.

That is why every time we cross the sacred threshold of worship, we tread on dangerous ground-far more dangerous than anything else we do, because at any moment, our masks may be torn away and our true motives exposed. We may find ourselves face to face with the Living God.

I think that may be the greatest gift that can be ever given us. That all our pretending, all our pretense, and all our wants and desires; at last can be cast aside, and we can find ourselves next to Mary, on the floor at Jesus’ feet with nothing left to offer him. Nothing left to offer him except our honest and naked devotion.