

“All Things New”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43 and John 12 – Lent 5

As in almost anything, what seems to be positive and certain in one minute, can dissolve into uncertainty and despair the next. Here is an example that is right before my eyes. The joy I can feel in worship can be diminished if I choose to count the numbers of people in the pews. It is no hidden fact that for the last several years, our numbers have been slowly diminishing, through retirement moves and sadly, through death.

Many congregations find themselves facing the same reality of declining membership. The traditional church is struggling to be relevant in a very different culture, where Christendom is no longer the center of the culture. When we count the people in the pews, our exuberance for worship is diminished because of that count. It deflates our joy in our gathering because we remember, as Isaiah writes, the ‘former things’, and we remember the days when the pews were filled.

Jesus has come for dinner. Mary and Martha and Lazarus are so happy to have their friend stay with them. What a week they’ve had. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. And Lazarus sits here, breathing and smiling and so very much alive.

Mary watches as Jesus comes into her house. He is tired. He sits down. And her heart tells her what to do next. She goes to the cupboard where she had placed the costly vial of nard for safe keeping. She takes the vial in her hands and walks back into the room where Jesus sits.

She kneels at his feet, breaks the vial, and the perfumed oil pours over his feet. It drips off his toes and onto the floor. She has no towel but instinctively takes down her hair and uses her long tresses to wipe the oil and smooth it over his tired, worn feet.

So much love. She wants to give tenderness. She wants to bless. She wants to answer this deep welling of thankfulness that rises from her heart. She doesn’t know why this is so deep a feeling but she knows she must do this very thing, now.

And when Mary anoints his feet, she does this not just for her, but she does it for us. We are with her in that room. We see the oil on his feet. We smell the fragrance of the perfume as it fills the room. We see the love in her hands as she caresses his feet. And the room stands still in this moment of beautiful witness. She does it for us. Her gratitude speaks for everyone who understands what this moment foreshadows – “But you do not always have me.”

She does not count the cost. But Judas does. Judas keenly counts the cost – 300 denarii that might have been his. The narrator tells us that Judas steals from the purse: “Judas 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.” If the nard had been sold, the monies would have gone into the purse – for him to steal. He counts the cost. In this scripture passage, John gives us the woman who does not count the cost and the man who counts the cost.

This past week's news included the shock that Canada's global warming is happening at twice the rate of everyone else on the planet. Twice the rate. At the same time, there is public rage over the provincial and federal carbon tax. The public is quick to count the cost to their bank account by the added 5 cents a litre for gas in some provinces. Governments who are looking for votes say they'll scrap the carbon tax program. But is it a cost we should be counting? The environment is the loser when pollution and emissions programs are scrapped.

Mary broke the vial and the oil caressed his feet. And then there was pushback. Judas says, "Why was not this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" It could have been used for other things, better things. We are quick to critique the cost rather than praise the generosity. There is always somebody who has a problem with your generosity. As a commentary notes, "So here is an invitation to daily companionship with Jesus, in extravagant acts of compassion and generosity, in moments of worship. All this in a world which lives by a mind-set of scarcity, rather than a mind-set of abundance, and so tempts us to close in and give little."¹

There is in the story of Mary, as she anoints the feet of Jesus, a beautiful abundance, a not counting the cost. Some call it gratefulness, an awareness of the gifts that surround us. Yet, gratefulness is missing in our culture today.

In her book, *Gratefulness*, Diana Butler Bass writes about the difference between I and We, between the private and the public lifting up of gratefulness. "We feel grateful when someone does us a favor or when greeted by a beautiful sunrise, but personal gratitude does not seem to make a difference beyond a limited sphere."² She adds, "The first act of being human is receiving the gift of breath, and as we go through life we continually receive. We sit at a table of gifts; we pass gifts on to others. Those gifts should not indenture others to our largess, for ultimately we own nothing. Death reminds us of that. But to pass on gifts, to live gratefully, is to liberate ourselves and humanity from the slavery of payback and debt, of entitlement, privilege, and superiority. Gratitude calls us to sit together, to imagine the world as a table of hospitality. To feed one another ... to know and celebrate abundance."³

Jesus modelled this for us. As he looked at Mary, as she knelt at his feet, caressing his feet with the tresses of her hair, he was grateful for her and what she gave him.

Diana comments, "Gratitude empowers us. It makes joy and love possible. It rearranges the way we see and experience what is all around us. Gratitude makes all things new. It transforms how we understand what is broken and gives us the ability to act more joyfully and with hope... Gratitude is strongest, clearest, most robust, and radical when things are really hard. Really hard. All-is-lost hard."⁴

Which is where Jesus was.

¹ FOTW, p. 145 Homiletical

² *Grateful*, xxi.

³ *Grateful*, 186.

⁴ *Grateful*, 186-187.

Poet Antonio Machado wrote, “Traveller, there is no path. Paths are made by walking.” It is painful, difficult work, making your own path. Stouffville United Church will have its fourth ‘Church at a Crossroads’ Conversation in a few days. We are not sure of our path. We wish it was clearly laid out for us but it isn’t.

In this passage from Isaiah, we encounter a God who stands in the midst of the Israelites, with these profound words of hope. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 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.” (Isaiah 43: 18-19) Even as they lived in bondage, even as they lived without hope of seeing their homeland again, even as they clung to their faith in the presence of staggering obstacles, God said to the Israelites, I will make a way where there seems to be no way. I am making things new – do you not see it?

Like the breaking of the vial of nard and the release of the fragrance of blessing, help our hearts to be full of your abundant love for us, that you will not leave us lonely but bring us to where you would want us to be – here in Stouffville, as your hands, your heart, and your voice.

Mary breaks open the vial of nard and the oil spills out; the vial casing is left broken on the floor; the oil drips, messy, lavish, and generous. As he left that house that next day, his feet refreshed, Jesus set out on the rest of his journey, a journey that would lead him to the cross. Did he count the cost of losing his life for us?

Amen.