



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

1309 R Street Lincoln, Nebraska 68508 (402)474-1979 www.stmarks-episcopal.org

The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent
St. Mark's on the Campus
March 25, 2007

OUR GOSPEL PASSAGE this morning is filled with details that establish a scene into which Judas crashes because he's not truly participating in the spirit of what's going on.

The details begin with the first phrase of this passage: "Six days before the Passover"

The time is drawing near to commemorate that event that the Hebrews had been commemorating for centuries: their deliverance from Egypt, the act of God that so solidified in their souls the bond that existed with their God. So much so that the Passover became the primary lens through which the Hebrew people understood both their *own* history and the relationship with God upon which *all* people depend, the God who is intimately involved in *all* history, both personal and corporate.

For followers of Jesus -- standing as we do with Him in that Jewish tradition -- the Passover also became a primary way of understanding the presence of God we know in Him: as we say each week, "Christ *our* Passover is sacrificed for us; therefore let us keep the feast."

So as this gospel passage opens, the time is drawing near for the Passover feast, the celebration of God's deliverance. The time draws near for the sacrifice of the lamb without which the feast cannot occur. John doesn't want us to miss that all of this is happening as Jesus and his followers gather for this meal in the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Think about what it would be like for the followers of Jesus to return to this home after that other time they had all been there: the time that Jesus stood outside Lazarus' tomb and ordered the moldering body of Lazarus to walk out -- and it actually did. It doesn't really matter whether we sitting here in the twenty-first century take that story literally or not, whether or not we can wrap *our* world view around such an idea, different as it is from the world view of the first century.

In the context of John's gospel, the followers of Jesus *lived* through that experience just as surely as some of *us* have lived through events in *our* lives that *we* would point to as signs of God's power in our world.

This home in Bethany is not just any random place for Jesus and those who have been walking with him. For them, this home is filled with signs of God's powerful, redeeming, delivering presence. And for those who live there, for Mary, Martha and Lazarus, that presence is surely heightened as Jesus visits them again, as a primary sign of God's presence sits among them once again and breaks bread with them.

That family does what most of us would do if we heard that Jesus and his friends were in the neighborhood. They invite them to dinner. And I bet it was a special dinner, whatever that would have meant at that time and place. Think of the gratitude Lazarus and Mary and Martha would have felt toward Jesus, and the joy they would have experienced at seeing him again. They might have brought out the best china and the nice napkins, barbequed the nicest cut of meat in the freezer - or prepared their favorite vegetarian meal. It's very much what we do each week as we gather to celebrate Eucharist: the family brings out the best silver, gathers at the piano - or in our case, the organ - to sing together - and we join together in our feast.

The point is that this family in Bethany would have wanted to celebrate anew - to once again express their gratitude to Jesus in whatever way they could. And so they use the things of life to do what we all want to do in our gratitude: to express the inexpressible.

Mary has this perfume, this very special perfume that costs the moon. Part of the way *she* expresses what she feels toward Jesus is to take this perfume and pour it over Jesus' feet, to clean the dust of the road off of them, and to make them smell better than they might have smelled since the day that he was born in that stable - maybe even better than that day!

Mary pours this perfume over his feet and then she bends down in front of him, a posture of reverence and submission, and, taking her long dark hair - I always picture Mary's hair as very dark, almost black -- she wraps it lovingly around Jesus' feet to dry them, to wipe away the perfume, and in doing so she picks up the scent.

It's an extremely intimate gesture; it's a humble gesture; it's a servile gesture. And with our celebration of Maundy Thursday's footwashing right around the corner, all the connotations of serving one another that accompany that rite come rushing before us when we think of Mary bowing before Jesus and caressing his feet with her hair.

The gospel story says that the fragrance of that perfume fills the house. I like to think that's a metaphor for the intimacy, the humility, and the service that Mary's gesture exhibits toward Jesus: that just as the perfume's scent permeates the air, so does her attitude permeate those around Jesus that day. We might share in it, too, across the miles of the centuries, as we move into this story, breathing in the perfume of Mary's gratitude and her humility before Jesus.

But. The story does not stop with Mary's loving action, maybe because we do not finally depend on Mary here, just as we do not finally depend on our *own* intimacy with Jesus or our *own* humility before God or on our *own* service. We finally depend on God -- just as the ancient Hebrews did at that first Passover. Just as Mary, Martha and Lazarus do.

Into this idyllic scene crashes Judas Iscariot. We all know there's a bit of Judas in us, a bit of the betrayer. Even so, Judas comes off really very badly here. Somehow the perfume isn't reaching his senses; he stands quite aloof from Mary's attitude toward Jesus. The story suggests that Judas has been formed by the continual repetition of stealing from the purse that he held in trust for all the disciples. It's easy to see how the repeated deception of taking money from his friends would build a subtle but very real wall between him and the others, including Jesus. By necessity he would have to keep a wall up in order to maintain the deception, a wall that would grow thicker with each theft, a wall not built for permeability; no, just the opposite: it would be designed to keep others out, to keep others from seeing the truth about him, and therefore it would have the additional effect of isolating Judas himself within it. This wall doesn't build a shelter; it builds a prison.

Judas isn't truly participating in what's happening in this home in Bethany. He can't afford to and still maintain his deception. That wall would crumble under the weight of the kind of intimacy that Jesus has shown toward this family and that Mary now expresses toward Jesus.

All our walls crumble under the weight of that intimacy, a weight that is not a burden, but one that frees us from the walls we build between ourselves and others, between ourselves and our God.

John interprets for us Judas' intentions. When Judas asks, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?," "He said this," John tells us, "not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief." Judas wants to get his hands on the money, pure and simple. In response, Jesus tells Judas to leave Mary alone. And then he goes on to say: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

His words come from the book of Deuteronomy, where they are followed by God's command to "open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and the poor in the land." Oddly enough, Jesus' words have sometimes been used in Christian history to excuse gratuitous consumption and ignoring of the poor rather than taking care of them, as Jesus seems to suggest by quoting this passage from Deuteronomy.

However, he does also seem to be reminding those gathered with Him of something else. In the economy of the world as God has created it, devotion and gratitude and humility get expressed in our relationships *with each other*, by serving *one another*. Some moments that devotion will occur by serving the person sitting next to us, a person who has been a sign to us of the overwhelming love of God acting in *our* history, a person whose name we know. Some moments that person will be Jesus, who carries God's presence so uniquely. At other moments it will be a parent or a child or a spouse; Uncle George or a sister or a friend or a colleague -- or the unnamed stranger in the street, dressed in furs or in rags.

Many of you remember Brian, who slept in our carport every night for many years and then simply disappeared one night and we did not know what happened to him. Thanks to a parishioner who spotted him on the street the other day, I can assure you that Brian is safe and sound. When I talked to him, he said he had simply moved, but that he's ok. He seemed pleased by the fact that we in this community cared what had happened to him.

I thought about Brian as I was preparing for this morning, because I would often notice the acrid smell of his body odor when I came into the church in the morning, lingering in the air from where he had slept the night before. And when I was talking to him the other day, I noticed his rotting teeth and got a whiff of his breath that wasn't completely pleasant. And I was powerfully reminded that interchanges between people in which God is present are not always filled with the sweet scent of Mary's perfume. Sometimes God can be present to us most powerfully in the stench of life, as *we* enter into it where God is already living and moving and acting.

Just as Jesus approached that tomb where Lazarus had been lying for four days, trusting that God was already there and up to something quite marvelous. We can no more assume that God is absent in the stench than Judas assumed that God was absent in the perfume being used to bathe Jesus' feet.

We are called to see and know God present *all*, in the perfume of life and in the stench of it. And we are called to enter into all of it, holding in our hearts the same trust that Jesus did as he approached Lazarus' tomb. And as he approaches his own.