

“It All Depends On Your Point of View”

+ 5 Lent C+

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

March 21, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

So much depends upon a person’s point of view. If there’s anything that ties the 3 disparate lessons together today it is the fact that with God in the picture things are never quite what they seem. Springs of water in a desert – a new thing – new life where there was no life at all; a race where even someone in my physical shape is in the running as well as tiny babies with no teeth who are unable to walk and little old ladies like my nearly 98 year old mother who also has no teeth and cannot walk but a few steps without her walker or a wheelchair; and finally a vibrantly alive dinner guest who has just shown power over death by raising “not merely dead but most sincerely dead” Lazarus – and this man is anointed for burial.

What is wrong with all these pictures? What is right? It’s all in the perspective. Funny, isn’t it, how two people at the same place, at the same time, can see the same situation with two radically opposed points of view. Certainly that is the case in today’s Gospel. Six days before His betrayal and death, maybe a week or two after raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus is visiting at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and the newly-alive Lazarus, in Bethany, a few miles outside of Jerusalem. For Him to do so was incredibly dangerous. Ever since raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus was within easy reach of His enemies whose power held sway in the capital city.

And, speaking of opposing points of view: While Mary, Martha and all their friends were thrilled to see Lazarus alive and well, and the witnesses to that event were blown away by it, Jesus’ enemies were pushed over the edge and beyond the point of no return because of it. From that point on, they plotted to kill Him, and to kill Lazarus, as well, to “get rid of the evidence,” so to speak. One event; but “It All Depends Upon Your Point of View” whether you are encouraged by it or angered by, thrilled by it or appalled by it.

So also, the incident that John wrote about and we read just a few minutes ago. As you might expect from previous dinners with that family, Martha was in the kitchen, hustling and bustling, cooking and serving, and likely, as before, muttering “where is Mary, when I need her help to put dinner on the table?” When that same thing had happened before, Jesus offered another point of view: “Mary,” He said, “has chosen the one thing needful”; namely, listening and learning, not cooking and cleaning.

Lazarus, as the man of the house, was reclining at the table with Jesus—some things never seem to change—the women always seem to get stuck in the kitchen. And as they lay on pillows,

noshing away, in creeps Mary, doing a creepy thing! That's one point of view—what Jesus accepted as an act of devotion, would have “creeped out” everyone else in the room.

Here's why: Decent women never interrupted their men at dinner. They silently served. Decent women never let down their hair in front of any man, except in front of their husbands. It was immodest, bordering on the scandalous. Decent women never touched the feet of another and certainly not the feet of another man. And they most certainly never, ever, touched those feet with their hair—their “crowning glory.”

Feet were “unclean,” and considering that they wore only sandals and that all kinds of waste and refuse were tossed out into the streets, not to mention the packs of wild dogs that foraged through the garbage and left behind their own souvenirs into which one would accidentally step, you can readily appreciate how only the household servant, lowest in the pecking order, preferably a Gentile, did the foot-washing.

But wait! There's more. A “pound of costly perfume made with pure nard,” as John reports it, cost about a year's salary for the average working man. And in an instant, with the break of the bottle neck, it was gone—a huge extravagance. No wonder Judas was outraged. John explained that by noting “Judas was a thief.” But I think he was also the voice of the other disciples who knew what was going on, but not why.

The “what” was outrageous! The “why” was utterly scandalous! Anointing was reserved for only two kinds of people: kings and corpses. Kings were anointed at their coronation and since the word “messiah” means “anointed one,” one could see Mary's anointing of Jesus from that point of view.

But His feet! Never! Not in a million years! Nard was a burial spice, for which a man would save his entire life so as to have it when the time came for him to be laid to rest. Very likely, it was that same perfume that the women would take with them to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning to finish the job they had hastily begun on the Friday before.

On the day of your death, you were anointed all over: head, arms, chest, legs, hands and feet, for the unappetizing but truly practical reason—so your mourners could stand the smell as they took you to your grave; a grave in which your body decayed for about half a year until your family re-opened the grave and gathered your bones to be re-interred elsewhere.

John doesn't say it, but I am certain of it, that when those around the table saw what Mary was doing, with what, to whom and where, their jaws dropped to the floor and except for two people they were left speechless.

Judas—whose point of view was both obvious and hidden: “Why the waste?” he said, “We could have sold this and fed the poor with the proceeds.” No one would have disagreed with that. And the hidden, “and I could have helped myself to it as well.”

And Jesus: “Leave her alone. She bought it...for the day of my burial.” It was a beautiful thing; a prophetic thing. Mary believed!!! Three times that we know of; probably more as they walked to Jerusalem, Jesus had told His disciples He was going to die. And they did not believe Him. They didn’t want to believe Him. They still hoped for armies of angels to follow their messiah and do what messiahs were supposed to do. They were supposed to win.

But here in this simple, extravagant gesture is faith in action by a woman who saw with the eyes of trust. She knew Jesus was going to die. And she did not rebuke Him; she did not oppose Him; she did not deny Him. She honored Him. And unlike Peter, she got out of His way.

“It All Depends on Your Point of View,” as you look at Jesus; His life, His death, His resurrection. The logical try to explain it. The skeptical try to explain it away. But there it stands—the truth that no point of view can change: a messiah king who came to win by losing; a servant-king. You know, it is kings for whom subjects are expected to die. Jesus turned that around and became a king who died for His subjects. That is the complete turn around the Gospel set loose in the world.

It is God’s point of view that we are worth saving—not because of who we are, but because of who He is—a Father reaching out to His wandering children, a creator in love with His creation, the Spirit alongside us to encourage and refresh us in the race toward heaven, the miracle worker making streams of water in the desert. God, Father, who like Mary, devoted and determined gave up the very best offering: His one and only-begotten Son, to bring all who are lost home.

Amen.

Now may our creator God whose grace waters the deserts of our lives, open our hearts to receive the extravagance of God’s love and grant our voices courage to proclaim the wonders of God’s grace.