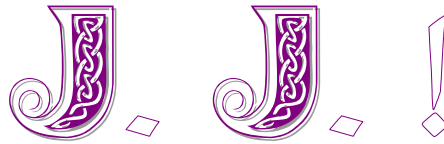


Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, 25.iii.2007, 10:00 a.m. EDT
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Holy Eucharist, WOV Setting 5
Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who
was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

"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."

--John 12:3

~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Oral presentation begins on p. 5 of the MS. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

[This is a story of a dinner party is found in all four
canonical Gospels. Matthew, Mark and John cite
Bethany, a short distance from Jerusalem, as the
location of the banquet. In Matthew and Mark,
Simon the Leper is the host. In Luke, the host is a

Pharisee named Simon. In Matthew and Mark, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus head with costly perfumed oil. In Luke, the woman is identified as a public sinner, probably a prostitute, who she uses her tears to wash Jesus' feet and who, as in John, anoints those feet with costly perfumed oil, applying that oil with her hair. Because the unnamed prostitute in Luke and Mary of Bethany in John both perform the same action, anointing Jesus' feet with their hair, Mary of Bethany has been traditionally identified with the public sinner, a woman whom Early Christian writers identified with Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdalene, "from whom Jesus cast out seven demons." In Matthew, Mark and John, it is a Disciple or the Disciples of Jesus collectively who voice disapproval of

the extravagant gift and treatment, objecting that the perfumed oil could be sold and the money be given as alms. In Luke it is the not so hospitable Pharisee-host who objects on the basis of the woman's reputation and Jesus' failure to recognize this. Not stated in Luke or John, but so obvious to anyone of that time and place, or to strict Muslims or Orthodox Jews today, the exposure of a woman's hair to any man to whom she was not related in her or her husband's immediate family would have been cause for scandal and possible stoning, not to mention the quasi-erotic action of washing a man's feet with the woman's hair.]*

[As John's Gospel narrates the story, it is

*Bracketed material not included in the oral presentation of this sermon.

Lazarus, Martha and Mary of Bethany who are the hosts of a banquet in Jesus' honor. Perhaps it was a gesture of thanks for raising Lazarus from the dead. By now he must have been feeling much better than on the first day of his new lease on life. The Dutch have an expression referring to that miracle. They say '*Ik ben het Lazarus!*' roughly translated, 'I feel like Lazarus!' when they want to describe feeling very ill, or suffering an especially bad hangover.]

[In today's Gospel, Lazarus must be feeling much better, so that he is able to eat and enjoy the company of his dearest friend, Jesus, and Jesus' Disciples. One of these, Judas Iscariot, pipes up to reprimand Mary for her extravagant and earthy way of showing her gratitude to Jesus. Jesus in turn

reprimands Judas with a rebuke that goes right over the heads of most Protestants, a saying that has nevertheless not been lost on the great tradition of the Church Catholic down through most of these twenty Christian centuries.]

Care for the poor, acts of charity, or, better, acts of social intervention and political action calculated to insure a decent standard of living for people is a clear Biblical injunction. We hear that injunction from the Prophets of Israel. We hear it from Jesus in His prophetic rants against those who ignore and oppress the poor. We are exhorted to make our faith concrete and genuine by living that faith in charity toward our neighbor. Faith cannot and dare not excuse us from doing all we can to make sure that

the 'poor in spirit,' literally the 'spat-upon' of this world inherit the promise made to them in the Beatitudes, that they 'inherit the earth,' that is, that they at least have the means to live. Faith is no excuse for the failure to be concerned for others and for the community in general in *practical*, concrete ways.

But there is also an *impractical* side to faith, faith which loses itself in the joy and wonder of the moment, or in a daring venture which may or may not work out as we hope, faith which may use scarce resources, thereby using up what might always have been given to the poor. This is the faith, for example, of those Israelites returning from exile, faith we hear about in today's Psalm:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 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. (Psalm 126:1,2)"

When those exiles returned to the land of Israel, they returned to a ruined land. Houses and farms had been ruined and neglected, so that the returnees had only a make-shift means for food and shelter. And yet, the first house the Israelites set about building was the *LORD's* house, the Temple. Using the finest materials that could be gathered, the Levites, Jews and Benjaminites of a reborn nation built anew a house for the whole people of God, a house that reflected the majesty of God in which both altar sacrifices and offerings the best of art and music could be brought so that all the senses of those who worshipped there could be uplifted. There were poor

among them, to be sure. *The whole nation was poor,* yet they were united in offering the rebuilt Temple as a thank-offering to the God Who had been with them all through the seventy years of exile, the God Who had brought them home at last.

When we think of all the great historic Christian churches that have been built and all the art and skill that has gone into them, it is well to remember that it was the faith of Saint Mary of Bethany and faith like hers that built them. As soon as it was legal for Christians to own property in common, great churches began to be built. Some of that building was at imperial expense, a way for Constantine and his successors to express their sorrow for the way the Church had been persecuted by the

State for nearly three centuries. But such building of such impractical structures did not end with the Christian Roman emperors. Christians from all levels of society united to build churches and to endow those churches with art and music to reflect the majesty of the King of Kings, in whose presence emperor, king, nobleman or peasant were all children of the same Heavenly Father, as well as all their posterity after them. In them, Saint Mary of Bethany was at work, daringly impractical, pouring out the best of what she had to show her gratitude for the lavish love of Christ.

Here at Saint James we finalizing plans to endow this church with a new set of white and gold Altar paraments for Christmas, Easter, other high festivals and funerals in memory of one who

passionately loved the beautiful services of the LORD's house, Marilyn Isennock. We hope that the paraments will be fully financed, measured, ordered and in place to be used next Christmas Eve. Could the money dedicated for this project be used for other needs, including those of the poor? Yes, it could, but its use as determined by Marilyn's family and her congregation will result in a gift lavished on the majesty of God among us in Jesus Christ, a gift to lift the hearts and minds and spirits of all who enter this church for generations to come. This is the time of year when we all look forward to the annual offering of love which the Beck family brings to the flower-gardening and landscaping of the church exterior. Could they spend their time and money on needs and

wants other than the beautification of the Lord's House? Yes, they could, but they have chosen over many years to offer *this* act of love, in addition to all the other service they perform in this Congregation. Both of these are but examples of that dimension of Christian service that today's Gospel brings to light, examples in which you, too, can participate.

The Church has not ceased to give lavish expression to her faith and, in so doing, to call forth the best of what is in us all. Like Saint Mary of Bethany, we should be keenly aware that this or that opportunity to build up the Church in a way that will stand for generations after us may not come our way again, that life is brutal in its brevity and that we are called to give of ourselves *now*, not on some postponed

day in a future that may not be ours at all. There are always those who will criticize us and rebuke us, loading their argument with the poor, but Christ as He is present to us in His Blessed Sacrament, at this Altar and in the preaching of His Word from this pulpit will not rebuke us. He will, instead, accept our poor offerings of thanks, giving not perhaps as we ought, but as we are able. ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and

dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now
and forever. ✠ Amen

