

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 6.iv.2007, 10:00 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bregue, Pennsylvania  
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philipptians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8  
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2

J. J. !

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

Jesus said, "*Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might  
keep it for the day of my burial.*"

--Luke 12:7

We will see each other again, God willing, on Ascension  
Thursday evening. On that day, unless Bob Leffel beats me  
to it, I will ring the Church bell one half hour before the  
service starts as a call and invitation to prayer and worship  
to all who can hear it. This is something I very much  
enjoy doing. When I arrive at the church on Wednesdays  
for the Prayer Hours or, in the summer, very early on a  
Sunday morning, I get to ring the Church bell a half an

hour and ten or fifteen minutes before the hour of prayer. If our intrepid bell-ringer is not present, I get to ring the bell right before the prayers begin or the service starts. In all those cases, even if the last if I enter the Narthex from the outside, I never know whether anyone hears the bell's call to prayer, whether anyone will come through these doors, but it is somehow a blessed thing to do for that very reason. Ringing the Church bell is, in a certain sense, purely an act of faith.

When asked by one of his students, what would he do if it were the last day of the world, Martin Luther replied, "I would plant a tree." In the earth created by God out of sheer love, he, Martin Luther, a man like all others, created out of that very earth, would plant a tree and give it to a future belonging to God alone, even if it

were the very last day of this old and tired world, renewing the earth through faith which comes from the Holy Spirit.

As busy as he was, each and every day of his life as a priest and professor, writing hundreds of commentaries and treatises and literally thousands of letters, I suspect that the Reformer had actually planted a tree or two in the garden of the Black Cloister where he lived, first as a monk and later as a husband and father of children. Though he remembered sitting under a pear tree and discussing weighty matters with his religious superior, Dr. Von Staupitz, I imagine that the trees Luther planted were *nut* trees, hazelnut trees, walnut trees, chestnut trees, almond trees bearing almonds, beech trees bearing beech nuts and/or oaks bearing acorns. Such projects in cultivation make no

sense to many, especially to the growers of *fruit* trees, those lovers of immediate gratification who look forward to seeing a return on their investment of time and effort in but a few months or years. Nut growers must either have patience and grow to a great age themselves, or they must have great faith and hope.

    Their gratification is anything but immediate. The satisfaction nut growers can count on is in the planting of their trees, in giving them a good start into a future which the planter may never see, hoping that they will bear nuts which the nut grower will likely never hold or taste in a future in which the planter must simply believe. What an extravagant thing it is, what an act of faith it is to plant a nut-bearing tree!

Mary of Bethany performs just such an extravagant act of faith in today's Gospel according to Saint John, a story we heard recently according to Saint Luke's account in our Lenten pilgrimage toward Holy Week and Easter. I find it interesting that, having just buried her brother, Lazarus, whom she would probably have to bury again someday, Mary still had on hand a whole pound of perfumed ointment for anointing the dead. Our Lord says that she had purchased it and kept it not for Lazarus' burial, but for His own. Now, out of her grief that was already breaking in upon her heart as she heard Him speak of what must happen in Jerusalem, this expensive commodity is mixed with her own tears as she washes Jesus' feet and dries those feet, soon to be nailed to a Roman cross, with her own hair. Mary pours herself out on this man without

a future, as far as any impartial observer can see. She has a critic.

With no disrespect intended to fruit growers, Judas would have made a good one. I am sure that, if he was investing some of Lord's and the Disciple's money on the side, he would have invested in figs or dates, and not in almonds or even in olive trees, which take such a *very* long time to grow. Judas wanted a return on his investment *now*. The same applied to his loyalty to Jesus. As long as it looked as though he could lead the Zealot cause of rebellion against Rome, Judas was all for the Rabbi from Galilee Who now led even John the Baptist's followers. But, with all His talk about loving the enemy, with His deliberate provocation of the religious authorities and power-base, and with Jesus' apparent determination to

get Himself crucified, Judas had already had enough by the time of that dinner party at Bethany. He was already making other plans, as we know.

Judas finds Mary's demonstration of faith ridiculous and repulsive. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" he whines (12:5). Of course he could not stand to see her give herself and her total devotion to the One on Whom he, Judas, had given up, to the One Whom he, Judas, was planning to betray. Her act of radical and courageous faith was intolerable because it confronted Judas with the image of all that he was not. But Judas did not dare say that, the *truth*. Instead out of his mouth comes some mealy-mouthed nonsense about the poor, as though he cared at all about

the poor. Jesus shuts him up right then and there!: "Leave her alone!"

Though He was an invited guest in the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary, they had invited Him as the Lord of that house and that table, and that is the way he spoke to another guest who ridiculed the faith of one of those three who loved Him so dearly, just as He had, earlier on in the Gospel narrative, protected Mary's act of listening to His teaching from her big sister's understandable need for some help in the kitchen. That is what the Head and Pastor of the Church, the true Good Shepherd of His flock does when the faith and devotion of His own is under attack, and that is what any faithful pastor of His Church must do. That is what I must do.

As part of the wider fellowship and communion of Lutheran Christians belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our Congregation stands before the opportunity and task of adopting and learning to use a new service book and hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, ELW* in Lutheran alphabet-speak. As resistant to change as any one of you, and for reasons of my own as both a pastor and a theologian of the Church, I do not think it is perfect. So what?! It is *our* hymnal for our time, and if there is not enough of this or too much of that to suit me, then the privilege of adjusting those deficiencies or excesses will fall to future generations, oh happy thought! Many of our congregations have already purchased and started using *ELW*. These congregations will soon include our sister congregation in Felton, a much

smaller congregation with more limited financial resources than ours. Our Council, by majority vote, has approved purchase of *ELW* by memorial subscription. Over \$200 in memorials have already been received for this purpose. In an act of faith comparable only to that of Mary of Bethany in today's Gospel, one of our members has donated an additional \$1,000, leaving only roughly \$1,800 left to raise before the new hymnals can be purchased so that we may begin using them by or before next Advent season. But, there are critics.

The critics object: 'Why buy new hymnals when the old ones aren't worn out yet? Why buy new hymnals when the congregation isn't able to pay its bills from current giving? Why buy new hymnals when we don't even know whether the congregation will be

inexistence a year from now?' *Some* of these critics, like Judas in today's Gospel, are already making other plans, visiting other churches until they find one that, as in the story of the Three Bears, is 'just right,' and even organizing a campaign to withhold both giving and attendance so as to cripple this congregation. Of course, to them, such an act of faith in *God* as the only guarantor of our future *is* both ridiculous and repulsive.

To those critics, to those hearing this sermon and to those who will read it on our website in 18-point type let me say this and let me say it plainly so that there is no mistake: I exhort you, if you have lost whatever faith you had in this congregation and in the Lutheran Church not as *your* church but as *God's* Church, may the Holy Spirit grant you faith and renewed hope, and may you join

anew in faith and hope with others in this congregation to follow Christ together into whatever future is His will for us.

Moreover I warn you, if you have not only lost your faith, so that you see the Church and this congregation as something over which you exercise the power of life and death by your actions of betrayal intended to harm this congregation materially, and if you choose to ridicule, belittle and disturb the faith and faithful efforts of others, or to discourage members of newcomers from worshipping here, I say to you, to paraphrase and apply correctly the words of Our Lord in today's Gospel: *Leave them alone!* If that is your attitude, then they are no longer your brothers and sisters in Christ and I am no longer your pastor in Christ, something you will be glad to hear if you

are weary of my ministry. But understand what you are choosing. You are choosing to share the fate of Judas, and, by your own choice, no one in heaven or on earth will be able to save you from a future which offers you death and only death.

If you think and teach others to fear that 2007 or 2008 is going to be this congregation's last year of mission and ministry, you may be proven right, but the rest of us are going to buy hymnals and sing from them for God's greater glory and praise and name them for the ones we love, and the Church bell will continue to ring, without knowing whether anyone will come to its call of faith, and some of us will go on planting nut trees. What will you do with the rest of your life?

**CHRIST IS RISEN!**

HE IS RISEN INDEED!

ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! ✠ 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.

S. D. G. !