

“Sheltering God”

John 12:1-8

LENT V - Gordon Wiersma

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There are a couple of parentheses in this story – if you weren't following along in your pew Bible, you can take a look, or you can take my word for it – and the parentheses contain some information about Judas. The parentheses aren't there in the Greek, it's a punctuation used in English, but they're put there because they are really a couple of asides from the writer – not directly part of the story, but some inside info for the reader. When Judas enters the story, we're told in parentheses: 'he was the one who betrayed Jesus'; when Judas tries to make his case for giving money to the poor, we're told in the parentheses: 'he didn't really want to help the poor – he was a thief.' The parentheses spell out for us as clearly as possible: Judas was bad news.

We had a wonderful discussion on this text at our study on Wednesday evening – we have one more Wednesday for the Lent series and I'm sure we'll do these kinds of lectionary discussions again – I hope you'll be a part of one. And in our discussion there was a lot of attention on Judas, as well there should be, because Judas is a fascinating and befuddling and tragic and important character – worthy of many sermons, just not this one. I'm not focusing on Judas, but oddly enough, the idea of parentheses did stick strike me in this story – not the ones about Judas, but looking at this entire story as a kind of parenthesis in the Gospel of John.

It's intriguing to me where it sits in the storyline of John – just before this is the culminating event of Jesus' ministry, the resurrection of Lazarus – the last and most dramatic of the seven signs Jesus does that we're told of in

John. It's an event that evokes strong reactions of both faith, as people believe in Jesus; and of opposition, as we are told the religious leaders decide Jesus must be put to death – and we are turned to Jerusalem where it all will unfold. And right after this story there we are in Jerusalem – Hosanna! – it is Palm Sunday. The drama is set in motion that leads to Jesus' death. Two huge events that bookend this story – and that inescapable reality is expressed by those comments about Judas – betrayal and treachery – the energy of the events unfolding towards the cross is ever-present.

But the story itself, it is very different than the major events that bookend it – it is a quiet story – a curious story, certainly, but a tender one. It is some friends having dinner – it is a pause, a parenthesis in the frenetic events – taking a collective breath.

And there at this dinner with friends, is this beautiful scene – this quietly dramatic action of Mary, anointing Jesus' feet with expensive oil – wiping it with her hair – perfume wafting through the whole house. It is an extravagant act; it is an intimate moment – Mary, tenderly caring for Jesus, not concerned about appearances – would we even say she is taking care of Jesus? It is drama that is beautiful and quiet, but controversial too – Judas barges into the scene complaining about the extravagance of it all, but Jesus pushes his objections aside – Jesus says this is good – it is fitting – there is a need for such things. The tension and energy of unfolding events is still present in Jesus' words – 'for the day of my burial' – but with all that swirling around, for this moment Mary is at his feet, and the house is filled with perfume, and Jesus has dinner with his friends.

In this Lenten season so far we have been abiding in the shelter and grace of God – good and important themes for us to hear of how God calls and saves and guides us; I'll say that is one bookend for this Sunday. Next

Sunday is Palm Sunday – the beginning of Holy Week, that moves us through the Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection – the culminating events of the Christian story; I’ll say that is the other bookend for this Sunday. So then what if this week is a parenthesis for us – a pause before all of that? Now I am not assuming that your life has been or is attuned to those themes of Lent or Holy Week ahead – you may not have been here or may not be here for what is ahead; I’m certainly not saying that our culture is attuned to that rhythm; there is plenty going on around us. Washington is voting on healthcare, not pondering John 12; there’s plenty going on in the world and in our lives, people just surviving or thriving or somewhere in-between. But here we are, gathered to worship – and placing yourself, ourselves here, we are placed into this particular moment – this parenthesis – in the Gospel, in the season – to see what it might say to our lives, and maybe even our world...what might it mean?

Here’s what I’m thinking – wouldn’t it be fair to ask, in a world of hurt and need, what business do we have being here? Think of all the resources it takes for this worship service to happen, let alone for this congregation to exist – the building and the staff and the heat on a snowy March weekend – and all of the time! An hour or more out of your life, hundreds of hours among us – couldn’t it all be used for the poor? Be better spent for good? Isn’t this all too extravagant?

I wonder if we consider often, or ever, how important it is not only that we worship in order to receive the shelter of God & looking to the events ahead in what God does for us, but also worship because of what we give and offer to God. Would we consider not only that God is a sheltering God, but that we offer shelter also to God? “Sheltering God” being something we do? Does that sound too strange? But it seems this story is

telling us something about our compassion for, our care for Jesus Christ. Jesus was sheltered in the womb of one Mary, his mother; Jesus is cared for by the Mary in this story, his friend – sheltering him with a moment of tender devotion, an extravagant pause in the midst of all that is unfolding – a moment outside of time in the midst of the inevitable press of time and events. A time to shelter her Savior in her love.

Have we considered that here in the midst of everything, we have paused for a dinner party? And even as in the language of communion we point to all that God offers to us in our lives, it is also a chance for us to offer our love, our care, our compassion, our tenderness to our God – to offer the beauty of our devotion to Jesus Christ who gives himself for the whole world. It IS extravagant, what we do here – perhaps you have not thought of it that way – or even that you are capable of or qualified to, or maybe not even comfortable with, the image of such tender care for Jesus. But there is a place for such things – we need a parenthesis in our lives to know what God offers to us; and we need a parenthesis in our lives to feel in our hearts a tenderness and devotion for this Jesus who journeys to the cross. We will have to make many decisions about how we use our money and time in our lives and in this world, but we believe that it is our devotion to Christ that will bring us to those very places of need and choices of grace to make in our lives. Here we are in the midst of Lent – in the midst of our lives – and we pause for a family dinner – extravagant – beautiful. In all that we receive here of God's grace, of life and death and salvation and grace, Mary's story tells us this as well: that we can offer our thanks and love, even offer our compassion and care to the one from whom we receive – even to shelter Christ with your tender gratitude. For then we will move toward what is ahead, closer to the heart of God. AMEN.