

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler  
The Fifth Sunday in Lent (C)  
Sunday, April 7, 2019

*Isaiah 43:16-21 | Psalm 126*  
*Philippians 3:4b-14 | John 12:1-8*

You may have noticed a new prayer I've been using during Lent at our closing benediction. Here it is again: "Gracious Lord you have brought us safely into this new day and we know not what it will bring forth. Make us ready Lord for whatever it may be. If we are called to stand up, help us to stand bravely. If we are to sit still, help us to sit quietly. If we are to lie low, help us to do so patiently. And if we are to do nothing, let us do it gallantly." Someone asked me, albeit very politely, how we exactly we do nothing gallantly! But setting that aside, I'll share that this prayer speaks to me, and I hope to you, because it points to choices – choices we face every day about living as Christians. And our choices are important.

Today's Gospel features two characters who are also making important choices. Two people who are extremely close to Jesus – Mary and Judas. And understanding their choices, how they respond to Jesus, could very well be the much needed wind at our backs as we push into this last week of Lent, on to Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Good Friday and the cross. Choices are important especially now.

The context for today's Gospel scene is key. Right before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time he stops in Bethany to see his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus was extremely close to these three siblings. John tells us that he loved them. So much so that, just a little while back, he worked his greatest miracle at their house – bringing Lazarus back from the dead, revealing a power and authority that pushed the Chief Priests and Pharisees past their limit. As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "Chatting with Samaritan women is one thing and healing the blind on the Sabbath is another, but reviving corpses is something else altogether. By raising Lazarus Jesus has made it straight to the top of the religious authorities most wanted list. His days are numbered and he knows it. And when he arrives at his friends' house in Bethany along with his disciples, they all can see it on his face."

Pushing through apprehension the tiny band shares a meal together, probably cooked by Martha who, like so many of us, over functions when she's anxious. At the close of the meal Martha and Lazarus's sister Mary does something remarkable. She kneels at Jesus's feet, anoints him with costly fragrant oil, and gently wipes his feet with her hair. We dare not miss the significance of this act. Notice that Mary pours the balm on Jesus's feet, not his head, clearly foreshadowing his impending death. The oil, or nard, she uses, is also quite expensive. But without hesitation she empties the costly perfume tenderly over Jesus's feet, honoring him and revealing her deep love and gratitude because his love has meant everything to her.

Now Judas is there too, and we should note his reactions in this unfolding scene. He's quick to point out Mary's extravagance and excessiveness. 'Mary's gone too far' Judas insinuates, "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" he demands. Based on his reaction to Mary's lavish act, we have two ways to think about Judas here. Either he is practical, prudent and actually concerned about the poor. Or he is an indignant, self-righteous hypocrite. Of course we know the role Judas plays later in the story so we know Judas's judgments are unsound, but

remember today we are thinking about choices – the choices Mary and Judas make. And here, as Jesus is about to set his face towards Jerusalem for the final time, here towards the end of our Lenten journey, choices are important.

Consider that Mary and Judas are in the same house, eating the same dinner, within feet of one another and Jesus. They've both been learning from Jesus, witnessing his powerful miracles, experiencing first hand his love and compassion. And here they are in this small home both again in the intimate presence of Jesus and yet they see two very different realities from which they make two very different choices. Mary chooses to love, love extravagantly, generously, yes excessively. She chooses to give herself over completely to Jesus, sitting at his feet once again but this time gently, bravely preparing him for his inevitable death. She believes his promises and she looks ahead bravely with uninhibited loyalty and love. Mary pours out all that she is and all that she has. She holds nothing back.

But where Mary sees the way, the truth, and the life, Judas, on the other hand, sees personal gain and profits. He questions, criticizes, he schemes. For Judas, the one who has stopped loving, a myriad of emotions must lie behind his petty reaction to Mary's loving: self-interest, jealousy, anger, greed, fear. Whatever it is that grips Judas, that binds him, he is unable to choose or even see love, neither in this night nor in the days to come. And whether he ever truly cared about the poor doesn't even matter. Judas is blind, unable to love his Lord whom he'll soon choose to betray. In short, Mary loves, Judas calculates. Two characters who will continue to play pivotal roles as we head to the cross – Mary choosing one way and Judas another.

As easy and tempting as it might be, we do ourselves no favor by condemning and dismissing Judas. Jesus didn't and we shouldn't either. In a very real sense, condemning and dismissing Judas is the condemnation and dismissal of ourselves. Judas is as much a part of us as is Mary. Mary and Judas are images and archetypes, of ways of being; of choices we face and make every day. To trust, to believe God's promises, to love; or to wall ourselves off, to limit God and ourselves, to not love, or be loved with our whole hearts. Both characters live within us. Both teach us something about our choices and ourselves. The truth is – sometimes we are Mary, and sometimes we are Judas.

Next week is Palm Sunday and so we, too, turn our faces towards Jerusalem. And again, we know the story. We know what's waiting at the end is Easter – God's generous, extravagant, excessive, lavish gift of resurrection and life everlasting. In short, God's gift of unending love. The choices we make in response to the gift of divine love are important, especially now. May we strive to make choices to love like Mary and may we help and forgive one another when we choose to be more like Judas. Amen.