

21 March, 2010; Lent 5C
Isaiah 45:16-21; Ps 126
Phil 3:4b-14; John 12: 1-8

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A few months after I arrived at my last parish, one of the secretaries sent around a note: “Don’t make plans for lunch on such-and-such a day. It’s staff appreciation day.” It turned out that one of the parish’s spirituality groups had taken on the project of cooking lunch for the parish staff each year as a way of thanking us for our work on their behalf. I have to admit, I was utterly unprepared for the scene which met my eyes. It would have been a lovely thing for them to have taken time out of their very busy lives to cook lunch for thirty people, but they didn’t stop there. They had placed nicely-ironed tablecloths on every table, with flowers in the center of each one. They had prepared, not a simple buffet of sandwich fixings, but an array of hot casseroles, beautifully-displayed salads, and a series of pies, each one topped, not with a crust like the ones I made, but with a crust which was made of bits of dough shaped like overlapping maple leaves. I had never seen such a thing outside of a Williams-Sonoma catalog! While I sat there and marveled, my friend Susan, who was one of the cooks, came up to me with a broad smile. Gesturing at the pies, she said, “Southern women. You can’t live with ‘em, and ya can’t live without ‘em!”

Now, I had been thinking that, actually, you really *could* live with this. The whole luncheon was a display of utter graciousness: the cooks had clearly decided not only to go out of their way to do something nice for people others sometimes didn’t notice (the secretaries, the sextons, the book-keepers, the people who ran the Sunday school), but to take the extra time to make everything beautiful. Everything about their gesture proclaimed “This is an act of love.”

When Mary of Bethany knelt at Jesus’ feet and drenched them in perfume, *that* is what she was doing. She was carrying out an act of pure love, of extravagant gratefulness, to this friend who had given her back her brother’s life. Everything in what she does points to it: the cost of the gift; the fabulous scent which must have poured out the windows of her home into the streets of the town until it made old people step more lightly and children cry out in wonder; the humility of kneeling at Christ’s feet; the intimacy of wiping them with her hair. She was trying to say to Jesus, as well as she could, “You are welcome. You are safe. You are loved.”

We behave that way, if we can, when we are expecting a child. Couples waiting for a birth or an adoption do everything they can to make ready. They prepare the baby’s room, paint it in lovely colors, select a crib and sheets with friendly images on them and hang a mobile which makes music. They take parenting classes and read books and talk to friends and relatives to get advice. They work to prepare an environment in which everything will say to their new child, “You are welcome. You are safe. You are loved beyond imagining. We loved you even before we met you. You have our hearts.”

We behave that way, if we can, when we are in love. We bring our beloved flowers, prepare meals and light them with candles; we take them to concerts and make time for long walks hand-in-hand. We give them our undivided attention. We take pains to look our best. We try to make everything we do an invitation to trust, to hope, to love.

The rest of the time, not so much. We save these gestures for extraordinary moments. To us, they are not usual, not normal. The very way we speak about such gestures betrays our ambivalence about them: We say they are superfluous, extravagant, over-the-top. The implication in each phrase is that they are unnecessary, extraneous, more than is required. And yet, it is possible to argue that it is only in such gestures that we reveal our full humanity. To be a human being is to love, and to love another person is to give more than is, strictly speaking, necessary. To love is to give everything, in one throw of the dice, to kneel down in awe before the wonder that is the other person, simply to

rejoice that they are alive and in this world. It is to regard the rest of life -- even the good things -- as “rubbish” if we cannot love them. (Phil 3:8)

Almost everything in our culture pushes against this understanding. We tend to be pretty utilitarian in our approach to ourselves and other people. We often think that what good does the greatest good for the greatest number. We are good if what we do benefits other people. We work hard. We make careful choices. We try not to be wasteful. And yet, in the Gospel, that is the position of Judas, not of Christ. It is Judas who objects to Mary’s gift, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred *denarii* and the money given to the poor?” (John 12:5) Surrounded by the lush fragrance of Mary’s offering, Judas cannot see beyond what is functional to what is beautiful. He lives in a nine-to-five world, where the only things which matter are things which can be counted, weighed out, and assigned a price. He cannot understand that extravagance might, sometimes, be a necessary thing.

But Christ replies, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” (John 12:7-8) With those simple words, Christ frees us from the merely utilitarian and opens a space for art, for beauty, for elegance. Instead of tying everything we have to purpose (and our lives to sheer drudgery), he allows us to exceed what is necessary -- even if it sometimes means that we have fewer resources with which to meet the rest of our lives or the needs of other people. David Steindl-Rast writes, “‘Art’... is distinguished by an emphasis on meaning rather than purpose, on celebration rather than use. Art in this case is a celebration, ultimately, of the superfluous.”¹ So, in a real sense, is faith.

When we gather in this room, we celebrate the superfluity of God’s love for us. We celebrate the overwhelmingness of God’s love poured out for us in the manger, on the cross, in the empty tomb, and in our lives today. The psalmist says it best: “My cup is running over” (Ps 23:5); to overflow is (literally) to be superfluous. When we drink Communion, when we sing in joy, when we still ourselves in prayer, God overflows into us. When we breathe, when we open our eyes in the morning or taste the good things God has given us to eat, God overflows into us. It is woven into the very weft of the world. When you stepped out of doors this week into the first warm day of spring, when you heard the birds singing back and forth and saw the gleam of a crocus in the mud, didn’t you smile in wonder at it all, to receive the world again as a gift, sheer gift, the overwhelming extravagance of God?

Celebrating these things is as dear to us as life’s-blood, because they *are* life’s blood to us. When Christ rebukes Judas, he does not speak only about love; he also speaks about death. “She bought [the perfume]” he says, “so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” Please notice: she *bought* it so that she might lay Christ to rest, but she *used* it to celebrate him while he was still alive. She used it to show her love for Christ while there was still time. She knew that Christ would die, and that there were things she wanted to say while she could.

We don’t often think that way, these days. But maybe we should. There is a wonderful health in remembering our mortality; it can incite us to savor this life while we are in it, to expend ourselves in gestures of love while we have time and place to make them. Such acts are our response to God’s eternal *Yes* -- our own responses of blessing, even in the face of loss -- especially in the face of loss. T.S. Eliot writes, “You are not here to verify, instruct yourself, or inform curiosity or carry report. You are here to kneel”² -- to kneel before one another while you can, to love those others whom Christ loved enough that he knelt before them in his time.

¹ David Steindl-Rast, “Art and the Sacred,” *Common Sense Spirituality*, p.50.

² T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” also cited by Steindl-Rast.

Next Sunday, we will enter Holy Week. We will walk, step by step, day by day, through the last hours of Jesus' life. We will have time to see and to know the measure of Christ's love poured out for us, full measure and running over. We will be able, if we choose, to offer to Christ the gift of our time, time to notice who he is and what he is doing for us. When Mary poured perfume all over his feet, Jesus did not simply shrug. He *noticed*. He celebrated her act of love. But noticing has its price. If we see, really *see*, what God has done for us, we will be changed. We will live more recklessly, out of open hearts. We will love more courageously, out of trust in what God will continue to give. So come, but come prepared to kneel in wonder. Not only at Christ, but at this whole great gift he has given us, this precious, unrepeatable gift of life.