

The Perfect Gift

April 2, 2017

1st UMC Sunnyvale, P. D. Schlager

Philippians 3:8-14

John 12:1-8

The cover is dull gray and not in the least inviting. it asks.

“Bored by being trendy?”

“Now you can be out of it and proud of it.”

The author is the founder of the **International Dull Men’s Club.**

Joseph L. Troise is the founder and president of

the International Dull Men's Club,

It is a loosely organized forum that

professes to speak for millions of Americans who,

do not wear designer jeans, are not listed in Who's Who,

have never joined a fitness club and wear pajamas to bed.

Last January a group of Dull Men, pushing lawnmowers,

marched as a unit in the Rose Parade in Pasadena, Calif.

They called themselves the

“Lawn Rangers, Precision Mowing drill team.”

Said Mr. Troise,

'In a sense, I think of myself as a missionary,"

***"What I'm trying to do is reach out to all the other people out there
who never tasted Perrier Water,***

actually like lime Jell-O,

and washing their own car,

but until now have been afraid to admit it."

He is thinking about

setting up a bowling league

And a bus tour of New Jersey golf courses.

I think I have found my tribe.

Actually, I am not crazy about any kind of Jell-O

and I hate to wash my car

so I may be a wilder and crazier guy than I thought I was.

I do know this, though; As I have left meetings somebody has commented,
"That was the duller meeting I ever attended,"
and I said,
"Yes, wasn't it wonderful?"

I'm also uncomfortable with certain **public displays of emotion**
which is probably why I am a Methodist
(at least a modern Methodist anyway)

The old Methodists, for a while in their history,
were shouters and dancers,
Back in those days, the **"movers and the shakers"**
didn't refer to those in city Hall
but to **those in the church meeting.**

I don't feel very comfortable with that kind of worship service.
Public displays of emotion are not in my personality.

So I am uncomfortable with the gospel reading for this morning
because it's one of these **public displays of extravagant emotion.**
Mary pours perfume on Jesus' feet, wiping it off with her hair.
A public display of extravagant emotion.
What does it mean? What does it mean for us?

Let me set the scene for you.

All four gospels include this story, and that in itself is unusual.

It is not unusual for Matthew, Mark and Luke to repeat the same story,
but when John includes it too, that is unusual.

But you have to be careful here because although they tell the same story
there are subtle differences in the way they tell it.

For instance, in Matthew and Mark

the woman is unnamed, and she is without description.

In Luke

**she is without name but she is described as a sinful woman
who weeps and whose tears fall on Jesus' feet
and she wipes them off with her hair.**

In John the woman is named.... *She is Mary of Bethany,
but she is not a sinful woman,.. she is a friend of Jesus.*

And it's not her tears that she pours on Jesus' feet,....
It's perfume Expensive stuff, called "nard."

So John's version is different than the others
and consequently it has a little different meaning too.

Mary of Bethany was Mary of "*Mary and Martha fame.*"

Jesus stayed with them once

Mary sat at Jesus' feet in the living room
while Martha worked in the kitchen,

resenting that

Mary got to talk to Jesus while she had to do the work.

And both Mary and Martha are sister to Lazarus
whom Jesus raised from the dead.

That's found in the previous chapter which means

it is the event that immediately precedes this anointing.

According to the Gospel of John

the raising of Lazarus from the dead

is what got Jesus in trouble with the authorities.

That incident of raising Lazarus ends with these ominous words:

"So from that day on they took counsel on how to put him to death."

And then the next line says,

"Jesus no longer went about openly."

which is to say,

he went into hiding.

He disappears, along with the disciples, out to Ephraim.

And then next comes our text. It opens by saying,

"It was six days before the Passover."

Which is about where we are, on this Sunday of the year.

We are about we are six days from the beginning of Holy Week.

So the church, a week before Palm Sunday,
Locks into the chronology of Jesus' last days
and we now follow Jesus day by day until the end.

Six days before Passover he comes out of hiding
returns to Bethany to the house of Mary and Martha.

The situation is tense.

The police are out there looking for him.

He's still undercover, although he has come back to Bethany.

The scene opens with Jesus eating with his friends.

The disciples are there, too.

I imagine that during the meal

he announced what he was going to do.

He tells them that

he is not going to run anymore.

He is going to Jerusalem, trusting that God is in charge.

Therefore,

no matter what happens, he believes good will come of it.

He doesn't know what will happen.

No one knows the future. Jesus doesn't know the future.

He took on our flesh, became like us, lived our life..

If he is like us... then he doesn't know what the future holds.

*He only knows that God is in charge of the future,
so he will trust God and head for Jerusalem.*

I imagine he finished that speech

and all is quiet in the room.

And then Mary quietly dismisses herself, goes into another room,

comes back and kneels before Jesus.

Remember, that Jesus' feet have already been washed, and are bare...

It's the customary thing to do when entering any household.

She takes that bottle of perfume... this "nard" and pours it on his feet.

Then she lets her hair down.

(It is a scandalous gesture for a decent woman in her time to do).

Respectable women did not do that. It had an intimate suggestion.

And then, --- this is incredible she

wiped the perfume off his feet with her hair.

a most extravagant, emotional gesture.

What did it mean? What is Mary doing?

Well, **You use oil to anoint kings.** If what she is doing
is anointing the Messiah and Jesus was the Messiah
that makes some sense.

But you **don't anoint the kings feet... you anoint his head.**

The only other time that you use oil

is to prepare a body for burial,

and then you cover the whole body with the ointment,

including the feet.

Is that what she is doing?

If that is what she is doing, if she is preparing Jesus' body for burial

then this is a prophetic act.

Nobody at the meal

wants to talk about this.

Nobody

will say what this means.

Nobody

will speak up and mention their feelings about what is going to happen.

They know what it means

that Jesus has come out of hiding and is going to go to Jerusalem.

And everybody

knows what it means.

It is inevitable.... He is going to die.

But nobody does anything... except Mary.

In a gesture of beautiful compassion and sincere devotion

she pours out a whole bottle of extraordinarily expensive perfume

as if she were preparing a body for burial.

Judas, who was there with all the other disciples
(he's named the treasurer of the disciples
did they have a nominating committee, was he elected?)
At any rate,..... the treasurer, true to form,
knows the exact cost of the perfume ...300 denari
a years wages in Palestine in those days.
And he objects to this extravagant waste.

Frankly I don't blame him.

I'm not really happy finding myself identified with Judas
but I think he was right.

It was a waste. Imagine... .a whole years wages!

Google says the average wage today in CA is \$51,000 a year.
Buy a bottle of perfume with it and pour it out.

What would \$51,000 do toward feeding the poor and housing the homeless?
I don't like siding with Judas on anything,
but I think he is right... It was a waste.

But Listen to Jesus... He reprimands Judas.

"Let Mary alone. The poor you have with you always.
You will not always have me."

That's obviously the punch line in this incident.

It is the last line in the story.

It's the definitive word from Jesus... the.... the point of it all...

"The poor you will always have with you. You won't always have me."

Which says,

there are times when extravagant gestures are appropriate.

Mary knows what is going to happen.

She also senses its meaning for us. He was going to die for us.

She knows that...

He is going to die for all of us.

What are we supposed to do with that?

What's the proper response when you hear that Jesus has died for you?

Mary is there as model for us.

*The appropriate response to the news that Jesus has died for you
is to give yourself to Jesus.... extravagantly, completely.*

I would imagine that what Mary gave Jesus
was the most valuable thing she owned.

So in giving it to him in effect she was saying
"I give you all that I have."

Let's take a break and turn to the epistle lesson

Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he says,

*"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth
of knowing Jesus Christ as my Lord.*

*For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things
and I count them as refuse, in order that I might gain Christ."*

He is saying that

he gave the same thing that Mary did. He gave up everything.

He had status, he had position,

He had honor and ranking in this world

He had a Jewish heritage that was wonderful

something he would be proud of all of his life...

He was proud he was a Pharisee.

But he gave it all up in order to follow Jesus.

It would be like somebody giving up a career

that they had worked so hard to attain

and spent so much money in training for

and then, just as they got to the top

they gave it all up, and walked away from it.

Not because they no longer found any meaning in it

not because it was no good any more

not because it wasn't important to do

but because

they found something more important and more precious.

Paul wants you to know

that what he did in leaving Judaism was an extravagant act

condemned by those who heard what he was doing.

An irrational act by normal standards.

*They thought he was crazy... to give up so much
"Pharisee of Pharisees,"..... That's what he calls himself.
Which is like being the most respectable of the respectable.
And he gave it up for the surpassing worth
of knowing Jesus Christ as his Lord.*

Now we come to that place in the sermon
where we have to bring it home and ask

What does it mean for us?

I think it means this

*There will come a time in your life as a Christian
when something is expected of you.
And at that time we may have to make a sacrifice.
We may have to let something go.
We may have to give something up.
We may have to leave something behind.*

It may be great, it may be small.

It may be something PUBLIC that everybody knows about,

It may be something PRIVATE that only you know about.

*What you do may gain the applause of the world,
or gain the scorn of the world.*

But the point is,

*that sometime, at some point in the Christian life
there comes a time when BEING with Jesus is over
and FOLLOWING Jesus begins.*

The time will come

*when you can no longer just be a HEARER of Jesus' words,
a hearer of his comfortable words of grace,*

There will come a time

when he call you to be a DOER of his words.

There comes a time

*when you can no longer just sit and receive what Jesus has to give.
The call COMES FOR YOU AND IT IS UNMISTAKABLE*

And the call is

to start giving something back of what you have received.

The point is made in all of the gospels,

all of the stories of Jesus are made in the same way.

At a certain point in the story of Jesus there is a division.

In Matthew Mark and Luke

it happens at Caesarea Philippi.

In Mark

it is exactly at the center of the gospel.

Mark has 16 chapters....

the turning point at Caesarea Philippi is at chapter 8.

Before Caesarea Philippi,

Jesus teaches and heals in other words.... HE gives.

AFTER CAESAREA PHILIPPI HE ASKS....

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO GIVE?

In John there is a turning point.

In John the turning point is at Bethany

with the raising of Lazarus and the anointing by Mary.

It comes again exactly at the mid point of the Gospel of John.

There are 21 chapters in John....

and this story happens in chapters 11 and 12.

Before Bethany

Jesus teaches and Heals;

AFTER BETHANY

JESUS HEADS FOR JERUSALEM AND ASKS...

NOW WHAT WILL YOU DO?

In all the gospels, there comes that time

when something is expected of you.

It's when Jesus starts talking about his cross.

And that's when he starts talking about your cross.

That's when he says,

*"If anyone would come after me let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me."*

Which is like saying

*there's a time in the Christian life for RECEIVING
and then there is a time for GIVING.*

There is a time for listening...

and a time for following.

There's a time

for the quiet countryside days of Galilee,

and there's a time

for the days of trouble in Jerusalem.

And the mystery of it all is

*that it is NOT IN GALILEE that you are really alive;
it IS IN JERUSALEM.*

That is why in each of these turning points

At Caesarea Philippi and at Bethany Jesus says,

"Whoever would lose his life will find it

and whoever tries to save their life is going to lose it."

That's the irony of the Christian life. It is not

in peaceful Galilee that you find life....

It's not

in the garden when he walks with you and he talks with you

But it is in

carrying the cross that you find new life.

It's only when

you are willing to give up all of this stuff

all of this "nard" if you will

that you will find what you are really looking for in this life.

What you are searching for

you cannot buy

What you are searching for

you will find only when you start to give.

That's the message of Both Caesarea Philippi and Bethany.

There comes a point

when you are called to do something with what you believe.

And that's when you start to live.

That's when new life begins to come to you.

That's what was happening with Mary.

Mary has received so much from Jesus.

For all of these months

Mary has clung to every word that Jesus said.

She has always done this.

She always sat at his feet and listened to him.

She looked forward to his visits to her house.

"What a friend we have in Jesus"

And her brother, Lazarus died

and Jesus came, and raised him from the dead.

And she was grateful for that miracle.

So for all of these months, maybe all of these years,

it had always been the same. He gave, she received.

He was most gracious and generous

and she was most grateful.

And that's the way it had always been.

And now he comes to visit her again,

and this time he tells her, and the others,

"My time has come."

Which means,

your time has come too. Now something is required of you.

Mary sensed that immediately, without his saying anything.

She got up, went out of the room

returned with the most expensive thing she had

and poured it on his feet

in an extravagant gesture of devotion.

Later in the same chapter, chapter 12

Jesus will say to Philip and Andrew those famous words

that he said to the disciples in other gospels at Caesarea Philippi,

So it's here at this turning point.

"If anyone will come after me they must take up their cross."

But he doesn't say that in the house a few verses before.

He doesn't say that to Mary.

But those words are implied.

It's one of those times

when what has happened calls for somebody to do something.,,

The scene is charged with that kind of expectation.

Something must be done..... Won't anybody say something?

It just has to be said... somebody has to say it.

The question hangs there in the room.

Who is going to respond? Who is going to do the appropriate thing?

What will you do?

That is when Mary does something.

She does what is most appropriate to the news that her Lord will die.

And at some point,

that time will come to each one of us

when Jesus asks something of us.

And when that time comes,

do it. And then you will know what it means

to find your life by giving it....

Amen.

SDG