Sermon for The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, April 7, 2019

Text: John 12:1-8
Title: Lavish love

I have a priest friend who recently returned from a five-month trip around the world. She and her husband carefully arranged a European sample platter of pilgrimage sites, vibrant monastic centers, and other hubs of Christendom, ancient and modern. Iona and Canterbury; Taizé and Chartres; Wittenberg and Rome: they hopped, skipped, and jumped from one to the other, like eager enthusiasts. And in their veritable grand tour, they saved the best for a last: an extended stay at St. George’s College in East Jerusalem, a beautiful spiritual and academic hub for Anglicans around the world. My friend had never been to Israel / Palestine and had been looking forward to the trip with both excitement and trepidation. St. George’s is known for curating thoughtful, engaging programs that confront guests not only with the weight of history but the weight of the present. It wasn’t until I visited there in 2003 that I realized most Christians in the Holy Land, including the hosts at St. George’s, are Palestinians living under occupation. We were encouraged to visit the ancient sites but also to listen to the stories of what they called “living stones” - people from many and diverse religious backgrounds, political perspectives, and ethnic identities. Knowing this lay ahead of her, my friend knew it would be and incredible, and incredibly intense, few weeks.

What she wasn’t prepared to encounter in Jerusalem was something else entirely, something that surprised her in the amount of distress and dis-ease it caused. She and her husband had been able to find Episcopal or Anglican Churches everywhere they visited. She’d packed a collar and clerical shirt with her, just in case, and whenever they stayed in a place long enough for those around them to learn she was a priest, she’d found herself invited to join the local clergy around an altar. It had been an unexpected delight of the trip to stand in so many sacred spaces, celebrate at so many holy tables, and share in so many holy meals. A few days into their stay at St. George’s, as the jet-lag slowly wore off, she began attending the services offered daily in the Chapel. But of all the places she and her husband had traveled, all the amazing sites they’d explored and enjoyed, in all those different time zones and languages and cultures, it was only in the city which Jesus loved and over which he wept that the Anglican Church – her Church – did not recognize her priesthood. The Anglican Church in the Diocese of
Jerusalem does not ordain women, and it does not honor the ordination of women ordained in other parts of the Anglican Communion. So each day, as clergy from the college greeted guests - many priests, like her, from far flung corners of the globe – she watched with sadness, and then anger, and then heartache, as he male colleagues were invited to assist in leading worship while she was sidelined, overlooked, asked to not wear her collar.

She was surprised by how much this hurt: not only to be unable to exercise her God-given vocation, to practice the ministry into which she had been called by the Holy Spirit, but to feel so entirely unseen. So misunderstood. So … alone. Because that, ultimately, is what being seen and known and recognized is about. It’s about our ability to connect with one another. To be in relationship. When we can’t really see the fullness of the person before us because of their gender or skin color or age or ability or ethnicity or religion or political party or whatever, we aren’t able to relate fully with them. Our relationships are compromised.

I wonder if this is how Jesus felt throughout his ministry – not only in Jerusalem but in Nazareth, Caesarea, Galilee, Bethany. All of the Gospels vividly depict his struggle to communicate who he really is: to explain himself, describe himself, to live fully into the identity given to him by God. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s Gospels, we see his disciples stumbling over words like, “son of man,” “teacher,” “son of God,” “messiah,” rolling them around on their tongues like clues to some impenetrable mystery: rock candy just too hard to crack. And by the time we get to John’s Gospel, it’s as though, realizing the words just aren’t landing, he appeals to their imaginations. I am the bread of life, he says. I am the living water. I am the true vine. I am the door. I am. I am. (Echoing that haunting “I am that I am” uttered to Moses in the Book of Exodus.) But despite all this, precious few people really got it. Really saw him (and let’s just take a moment to notice that almost all of them were outside his social order: a Samaritan, a Canaanite, a Roman, a tax collector, women, a Gentile.) He was like my friend, a priest in the Church of God, walking through the holy city, invisible.

It must have been terribly lonely. Terribly frustrating. And Jesus himself seems to move through various stages of sadness, anger, and heartache as he reconciles himself to this disappointing experience. He never gives up, though, and when we find him this morning he is running out of time. John makes sure to point out that it was only six days before the Passover, benchmarking for us just how close we are to the catastrophe that lies ahead: the meal in the upper room, the betrayal, his arrest and execution at the hands of the empire.
The end is near, but we’re not at Jerusalem, yet. First, he returns to Bethany, a town he’d left just a few days before after raising his friend, Lazarus, from the dead. The city must have been buzzing with the story. It was headline news! It was trending now! So the siblings – all longtime, dear friends of Jesus, like college roommates or elementary school co-conspirators - give a dinner to welcome him back and celebrate this miracle. It’s not clear if this was a big blowout or an intimate affair, but we settle down at the table where Jesus sits with the three siblings and another dear friend, Judas.

Now, let’s take a moment to step back, knowing the things we know about these people. There’s Jesus. The word incarnate. God’s light and love made flesh, dwelling among them. But do the four people at table with him notice? Do they realize? Can they see? We might like to think that if Jesus sat down at our dinner table, or strolled into our office, or setup shop next door, it would not escape our attention. We’d take note. But would we? We seem to be as confused by appearances as the people he encountered 2000 years ago. Maybe he’d be a woman, like my friend, the priest. (I can assure you, ordained women do not need to go to Jerusalem to be diminished, sidelined, or silenced.) Maybe he’d be a Samaritan or a Canaanite or a Gentile – in other words, an Arab, or a Mexican, a native of L.A. Maybe he’d be dressed up in the tradition and trappings of another philosophical or wisdom tradition or – gasp – a different religion all together. I feel a lot of compassion for the people who actually encountered him on this earth. They were being asked to stretch – to stretch far – and it could not have been easy.

It seems to me that today’s Gospel is about what happens when we finally realize who Jesus is. When we finally recognize him. When it finally clicks. When we take him at his word – no matter how mind boggling and bizarre that word might be. There he is. The word incarnate. God’s light and love made flesh, dwelling among them. But do the four people at table with him notice? Do they realize? Can they see? Martha is busy serving. She is tending to the details: bringing the bread out, topping off the glasses, keeping conversation going. These aren’t bad things, but she’s distracted. It’s hard to stay present when you’re rushing to the next thing. And Lazarus sits, ready to enjoy the feast with his friend. But that’s pretty much it. I’ve always found it interesting that Lazarus is raised from the dead and then we pretty much never hear from him again. The guy was brought back to life and he does not, as far as we know, drop everything to follow Jesus. He goes back to his familiar routines. Things return to normal. Did it change him? Didn’t it mean anything?
But Mary … it seems Mary alone really sees Jesus. Recognizes in him God’s self-emptying, lavish, absurd outpouring of love. God’s grandest, most extravagant gift to the world, sitting at her family’s dinner table, about to dig into the lamb. And it’s almost like she can’t help herself. It so moves her that she cannot contain the love she feels within, cannot stop the joy bubbling up, cannot restrain herself as she reaches for that oversized bottle of Chanel #5 – OK, it was nard – and pours it lovingly on his dusty, crusty, oh so human feet. It was the nicest thing she had. The most beautiful thing in reach. The finest offering available. And recognizing the exorbitant, over the top gift of Jesus’ life, she is moved to offer back her best, offer back her love, offer back her whole, true self. She finally sees him for who he is, and she finally believes what he has been saying about what that means: that he is walking to his end; that his time is short; that this moment – and every moment – with him is precious.

Many people of faith have seen this anointing through the lens of Jewish burial customs. Jesus died so bereft, so utterly alone on the cross, and his followers were so stunned or so scared that they scattered, and so it was easy for those who didn’t know Jesus to figure he had not been properly anointed before being laid in the tomb. Those closest to him, though, they took heart, knowing that Mary had done what needed to be done six days earlier. But I wonder if it wasn’t even more than that. Mary didn’t only see what was about to happen but who he was - the Christ - God’s transcendent love, eternally sanctifying creation, somehow made human in her friend. After all, Christ literally means “anointed.” So perhaps this was the moment Mary recognized him not only as Jesus of Nazareth but Jesus the Christ, our great high priest, and took it upon herself to enact that reality.

Surely Martha and Lazarus wondered what she was thinking. What had gotten in to her? And Judas openly criticizes her for such careless waste. The perfume could have been sold and the money given to a poor. What was she thinking? (Though with lots of winks and nudges, we’re made aware of Judas’ true intentions.) I love that we hear this story the week after hearing the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It seems, as we draw ever closer to Jerusalem with Jesus and his friends, that we’re being reminded that God’s highest values are not efficiency, productivity, and frugality. The ours is not a stingy God keeping detailed accounts. Much of our competitive, consumeristic lives are driven by such values, but when we really think about them they reveal themselves as ultimately absurd. Do we strive to be more efficient giggling with our children or grandchildren? Do we wish our date nights were more productive? Do we lament not being
stingier when hosting a birthday party? Do we not know – deep down – when little ones come running to us that they are not going to be three forever, and that being generous with our time, attention, laughter and tears is the only thing to do? Do we not realize when the sunrise takes our breath away, stopping us in our tracks, that the sky will not look like that forever? That the world is alive with these precious, fleeting gifts, even still? And that offering back our best gifts, our best selves, is the only way to respond? We almost can’t help ourselves, even the most efficient, productive, frugal among us.

There’s something about this God of ours that is all abundance in the face of scarcity, all welcome in the face of shame, all mercy in the face of wrong, all love in the face of fear. And if we are willing to stretch to see that – maybe even to stretch far – revealed in the life of Jesus, revealed in creation, in scripture, in neighbor and stranger, in our own hearts, we might find ourselves gripped with something wonderfully strange, compelled to give back with lavish love, gladly pouring out - wasting - our greatest gifts if it means lingering in God’s company one moment longer, the sun on our faces, the tears on our cheeks, the giggles echoing in our ears. May the world be filled with the fragrance of Mary’s perfume. At the very least, may our own hearts overflow with it. Amen.