

“On Toward the Goal”
Philippians 3:4-14; John 12:1-8; Isaiah 43:16-21
Lent 5

John 12:1-8

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Philippians 3:4b-14

⁴If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

A Prayer of Gratitude

God of heaven and earth,
You who speak intimately to our everyday lives
and rule majestically in the cosmos,

We lift up to you our gratitude for your reign in heaven and on earth.

For life—

the astonishing series of interweaving coincidences,
 over the course of millennia, that led to our being born,
 and the assurance that you already “blessed us in Christ
 with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,”
 and “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world
 to be holy and blameless before [you] in love.”ⁱ

For the blessings of our lives:
 the relationships, the memories, the reachable dreams;
 the sacred sights, and sounds, and tastes, and aromas,
 and sensory touches that enrich our existence
 and hint at still more profound beauty behind and beyond them.

For the world of the nations and machinations,
 the order that humankind has made
 and to which those without power are subject.

Though flawed and corrupt,
 it at least gives us a starting point:
 a rough draft of a world of justice and mercy
 in which everyone has access to food
 and flourishing is possible for all.

We continue to pray that you will help us get there, and soon.

For the world that is this planet,
 its elements of earth, air, fire, and water;
 “a blue dot where everyone we know,
 and everyone we ever heard of,
 and every human being who ever lived,
 lived out their lives...
 the only home we have.”ⁱⁱ

For the world which is the cosmos of your whole creation,
 infinite, eternal, yet still not as vast as you are.

For your Son Jesus, and everything that made him human.

The eyes, that look at us in our minds eye,
 pure integrity drilling into our souls as we meet his gaze;
His feet;
His voice, his prayers;
His magnetic presence;
His energy, and his example of compassionate care
 yielding tangible results for human lives
His tiredness, and his need for time alone with you.

We thank you that in his humanity, we know him as one of us.

And we thank you that in his transcendence, he is, with you and the Holy Spirit, the one God who encompasses and extends beyond all time and space and reality.

For all of these gifts, we give you thanks, O God,
 as we recognize that in all things but especially in Jesus Christ,
 you are continually reaching out for us,
 calling us back to you.

In his name we pray, Amen.

The Sermon

Have you ever been out camping, or just gone outside late at night, and looked up at the deep blue dome of the sky, bordered, depending where you are, by tree lines or mountains or skyscrapers or the ocean or the earth's horizon?

Occasionally a light like a star moves silently across the sky, and you recognize it as a practically miraculous capsule full of people just like

us, lives just as troubled and tragic and magnificent and beautiful as yours, sailing through the skies as people have skimmed the surface of great waters since before history.

And our eyes are lifted up beyond the aerial lanes, past the atmosphere that protects us,

and we behold against the deep blue backdrop the stars and constellations, light meeting our eyes that was emitted untold hundreds of millions of years ago, and we recognize not just our breathtaking tininess in God's creation, but the vastness of what we are connected to, what we are part of.

Though our thoughts of God can be sporadic and often self-serving, God's reaching out to us is constant, like the speed of light, more eternal than the heavens and the earth.

All creation is inviting us to a unity with God that is not dependent on how well or how poorly we have managed to embody our virtues:

our ability and our willingness

to discern what is right and what is not right to do;
our courage to be strong enough

to confront fear, uncertainty, and intimidation
for the sake of God's message to the world;

our willingness and ability to control ourselves
and face down the trials and temptations

that threaten to sideline us;
our commitment to justice and fairness and righteousness
in terms of the way all people are treated.

Without regard for how well or poorly we have comported ourselves in doing what God brought us here to do
and being who God created us to be,

God keeps inviting us to a deeper and fuller unity,
and keeps equipping us to do
 what's good and courageous and right and just and true;
and keeps stoking in our hearts a longing for that day
 when every aspect of the world is inseparable from God.

Fortunately, there are some among us who are trying to do whatever they can to bring about that unity, too.

Mary went and brought out a pound of perfume made of a substance called nard, or spikenard— incredibly expensive, because it had to be imported, literally, from the other side of the world. Imagine the odyssey it would take, in those times, 2,000 years ago, to get that substance from one place to another, along the ancient Silk Road, or the spice trade routes by sea.

She took a pound of perfume made from that painstakingly imported substance, and anointed Jesus' feet with it.

Those were the feet that had brought him to Bethany
 when it seemed like all was lost.

Those feet had carried Jesus into the village, to the front of the tomb,
 where he reached into the dead, empty darkness
 and called her beloved brother, Lazarus,
 back from the primordial void which had swallowed him whole,
 and brought him out like a newborn baby,
 back into the light of life.

Nard is profoundly aromatic, and when she had anointed his feet, the whole house filled with that beautiful fragrance.

She had poured it, extravagantly, on his feet; and now, in a gesture of absolute humility, she wiped his feet with her hair.

Naturally the money counter in the room didn't get any of this. That's the case with all of us who worry—and not without reason—when the money starts to get tight. All of a sudden deep devotion, even to the most important things in the world, seems like an indulgence.

Maybe Judas was as bad as John makes him out to be, but I also think that maybe he just wouldn't have gotten it anyway.

When you're in charge of the company purse, you don't have to be corrupt to be concerned about whether it's being used appropriately, emphasizing thrift and maximizing efficiency. *Of course* Judas wouldn't understand what Mary was doing.

Because Mary, in her act of devotion, is pressing on toward a goal that is somewhat higher than budgetary restraint.

She was trying in whatever way she could to bring the realms of heaven and earth another step closer to joining together.

In the middle ages there were many in the Christian tradition in Europe and elsewhere who took devotion to extremes that you and I would consider bizarre, and probably indicative of severe mental illness.

One of those people belonged to a religious order called the Beguines. She is not widely known today but history remembers her as Marie d'Oignies—Mary of Oignies, a small town in northern France.

In her daily life, she spent untold hours in her community, working hard, working long hours, visiting the poor neighborhoods surrounding the

communal house, having already given everything she had to try to make sure that the poorest could still eat.

In her contemplative life, she had what was called the “gift” of tears; she would weep copiously at the sign of the cross; it wasn’t just that something made her melancholy, but it was interpreted as a gift of the Holy Spirit, like speaking in tongues.

She worked herself and punished her body to extremes that would be intolerable if someone you loved tried to undertake them. And there were many thousands more like Marie d’Oignies.

The service to the poor was not a strategy to try to earn God’s favor. It was simply a natural aspect of her extreme devotional life. When she fed the poor, she wasn’t trying to do anything other than feed the poor.

And it was the same with the worship life where she would be up all night or refuse food for days at a time or any other expression. She wasn’t trying to get God’s attention; she knew she already had it.

What she was trying to do in her extreme devotion was simply to be extremely devoted. The deepest wish of many of the medieval mystics like Marie was for the full realization of the unity of the realm of the earthly and the realm of the divine.

Paul said to the Church at Philippi: look, if you want to talk about accomplishments and identifying factors that indicate whether somebody’s a member in good standing of the Holiness Club, I’ve got a resume to beat anybody’s.

But for the sake of following Jesus, he had thrown it all away, and by that point he realized it was meaningless anyway.

He said: I don't want the medals and the certificates and the status; those trinkets and bone fides aren't where it's at. Instead,

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings

by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

Like Mary, pouring out costly perfume to honor the feet of Jesus, and then wiping them down with her own hair;

like the medieval mystics who saw their own suffering along with their devotion to the poor and their ecstatic worship as somehow helping to unite them with Christ;

Paul saw what he was doing—working, suffering, praying, worshiping, telling the good news everywhere—as pressing on toward the goal on behalf of the whole world.

George Bernard Shaw wrote:

"This is the true joy of life, the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

"I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live.

“Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Mary and Paul and the Beguines and many other Christ followers down through the centuries and still in the world today—they were trying to move us forward.

And maybe they couldn’t fix everything about the way the world functioned, or resolve every social, religious, political and economic injustice in their own lifetimes, and maybe you and I can’t, either.

But they could do their part to make it more bearable for those who had it the worst.

And they could play their part and live in devotion to the idea of bringing the world closer to the unity with God in which lies our ultimate salvation.

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ⁱ Ephesians 1:3-4 (NRSV)

ⁱⁱ Carl Sagan, addressing a press gaggle in footage preserved in the 2017 documentary *The Farthest*

ⁱⁱⁱ George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, Epistle Dedicatory