

St. Paul's Congregational Church
April 7, 2019 (Lent 5C)
Isaiah 43: 16-21; John 12: 1 -8
Something New

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On this fifth Sunday in Lent, our thoughts turn to suffering. As they should since we are fast approaching Holy Week and the Walk of Sorrows. This is why the highly poetic words of the psalmist, so filled with joyful images, are jarring on this particular day.

*Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy.*

And later, the psalmist sings,

*Those who sowed with tears
will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.*

Isn't this such a peaceful, comforting picture on a day when we know suffering is inevitable.

In the Gospel story, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. We know what that means. He knows what is coming, even though those who are closest to him refuse to see or even acknowledge it. "Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him." He had just brought Lazarus back from the dead, revealing a power and authority that threatened their own religious and political control, "So from that day on they planned to put him to death." It was that stark.

Jesus, knowing this, starts on his way to Jerusalem, but first, he stops in Bethany to visit his dearest friends. We don't know why Lazarus, Martha, and Mary had become his close friends, but we do know that their love for one another was great. And we also know that when we are in danger and in pain, we long for someone to sit with us, to accept us as we are, to comfort us by just being there; someone who will not argue by telling us all will be

all right, but someone who will share in our apprehension, without words. Such was the friendship between Jesus and these three siblings.

We already know that they loved having him visit, with Martha anxious to feed him and Mary anxious to listen to him. In that previous meeting when the two sisters argued, his visit to them was for their sake. And when their brother died from illness, his coming to them was for all their sakes.

But now, a few days before his arrest and immense suffering, he comes to them for himself. He needs human companionship and human comfort. And they give it to him. They call other friends to come join them at a festive dinner. The siblings don't know what is about to happen to him; they simply know that he needs to be near them. Martha, as is her habit, does what she is used to doing: she feeds the people she loves. Mary, who probably had known more of the world than Martha did, goes the extra mile. Food is not enough for her; only the most precious gift will do. In her extravagant act of pouring the costliest perfume on Jesus' feet, she honors him and reveals her deep love and gratitude, because he has indeed made her life worth living with his words and actions.

It's a lovely moment at that banquet of love. The whole house fills with an exquisite aroma of thanksgiving. A lovely moment spoiled with pettiness by the one who has stopped loving his teacher. Judas claims that beauty and gratitude are a useless extravagance when there are poor people around. Whether he truly cared about the poor or not does not matter here. What matters is Jesus' response: Leave her, he says.

When a heart is filled to overflowing, don't quench it. When a throat sings of love and praise, don't silence it, just because others are weeping. An expression of love that rises beyond the absolute necessities of life is acceptable, Jesus is telling them. This is a special occasion. He knows that he will not be seeing his friends again. He will carry with him the aroma of their love and devotion. As he stumbles with the cross on his back, the stink of the crowd, of blood and sweat and ugliness all around him, he will remember this moment of overwhelming gratitude. His earthly life has not been easy and comfortable. This dinner with friends, their laughter, Martha's good food, and Mary's gift of love are the last reminders of what is good in this earthly life. We are glad that he is being given this last gift among dear friends.

The suffering that is about to begin is the aberration. What is normal is life with all its good gifts: Love of family and friends, food for the body,

and beauty with all its appeal to the senses. This story gives permission for us also to cherish these good gifts.

And now, Jesus will set his face toward Jerusalem, suffering, and death.

Paul, his most ardent follower after that encounter with the risen, glorified Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul also knows about suffering. Imagine him sitting in a prison room somewhere in Rome. He has already talked so much about his Christ that even the praetorian guards know the name. Paul's love for Christ is like that perfume of Mary's poured on the feet of Jesus. It is extravagant beyond knowing. He spends his time in his prison cell remembering those he loves and writing them letters. He has so many beloved children—all those, both Jews and Gentiles, who have heard the good news from him and have created the loving and hospitable communities of faith in Asia Minor and around the Mediterranean basin. He does not feel sorry for himself. He is thinking about a particular group of people, the first Europeans he met in Philippi, women and men he has loved through the years, and he wants to give them encouragement. Even though the great persecution of the church has not yet arrived, the communities of faith already are facing many troubles, dangers, and suffering. He is sharing in that suffering. Lest they start weakening and wondering, Why is this happening to us—we have done nothing wrong, he reminds them of his own situation. Look, I was such a fortunate son of Hebrew parents, he reminds them. He was fluent in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and who knows how many other dialects. He could have lived a comfortable life, highly educated as he was. And above all, he was meticulous in his observance of the Law, blameless, when it came to that observance. But look, he continues, I consider all this as nothing, as dross. "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More 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."

Everything falls into perspective. We live surrounded by suffering. It causes questions and doubts, anger and despair. Jesus knew about human suffering in himself and others, but he remained obedient to a loving God, even unto death. Paul lived in perpetual struggle and agony for the sake of the Christ who called him to himself. Paul has encountered the living Christ so "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal" of being with Christ, he tells the Philippians. On

this fifth Sunday in Lent, we too set our eyes toward resurrection. Maybe this was the vision of Isaiah when he imagines God crying:

*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

In the UCC Daily Devotional yesterday, Tony Robinson wrote about extravagance that might seem out of place:

“I used to volunteer at a food bank. The donations, some of which came from individuals and others from stores, weren’t always the cream of the crop. Packaged foods with sell-by dates that had passed, canned foods that were dented, pastries that were no longer fresh, fruits and vegetables too bruised to sell.

Judas would have approved. No wasteful extravagance there. The poor got the leftovers.

The only times when the food bank felt remotely extravagant were the occasional days the food bank got chicken. You could tell when it was a chicken day because the line outside suddenly ballooned as people texted family and friends the news, “chicken today!”

In Karen Blixen's short story "Babette's Feast," which was made into a movie in 1987, a parsimonious and dying Scandinavian religious community took in a refugee from the Franco-Prussian War, Babette. Not knowing that Babette was an extraordinary French chef, the pinched saints set her to the task of preparing their daily meals of boiled fish and potatoes, which was roughly on par with asking Einstein to keep track of your checkbook.

When Babette discovered she had the winning ticket in the French lottery, she spent the entire sum—10,000 francs—to prepare a feast for the members of the tiny sect. Bags, boxes, and crates of fine wine, cheese, meats, vegetables and fruits arrived. The finest pastry flour, spices and cream.

Babette's extravagance scared them. They thought she might be a witch.

Extravagance can do that. Scare us. It scared Judas. And extravagance, God's extravagance, can save us. Mary anointed Jesus so extravagantly because she understood, and did not fear, the extravagant mercy of God.

Remember the words of the psalmist: *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Despite the suffering and the cross, may we too perceive the life that springs forth in Christ and be comforted. Amen.