

BLESSED THE CARELESS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

March 21, 2010

Scripture: Psalm 126; John 12:1-8

I would have loved to have been a guest at the table on one of those occasions when Jesus came for dinner. They were among the most memorable occasions in the gospels. That evening, for instance, he went to Zacchaeus' place, having spied Zacchaeus in a tree earlier in the day.¹ It would have been interesting to have been at the home of that Pharisee who asked him over, that night the controversy broke out about Jesus not washing before dinner.² It was said that Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. Now that would have been an interesting meal!

There was, of course, that last supper, the Passover meal, that the disciples kept together in the upper room. And there was another evening like the story today, Luke describes it, an evening at the home of a Pharisee, where a notorious woman anointed Jesus' feet with her tears, and dried his feet with her hair.

I wonder what the table conversation would have been like at some of those meals. What Jesus' opinion on health care might have been. Or on the rising number of homeless in our city. What he would think about capital punishment, or about the slow economy and its effect on the middle class. Maybe over after dinner drinks you might get him to say something about the Israeli Palestinian situation. He was, after all, capable of some rather provocative comments.

Take that night described in our passage today, the story of a dinner party at the home of his good friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

It was six days before the Passover. Lazarus had gained some fame in that little town of Bethany because by this time in the gospel Jesus had raised him from the dead. As usual Martha was bustling about the table, serving the dishes and keeping everyone supplied with ample amounts of food.

Five days before the Passover according to tradition, the lamb that will be slaughtered for the Passover meal is chosen, so six days before the Passover sets the occasion into its larger succession.

While they were at the meal Mary, who had sat at Jesus' feet to learn of him on a prior visit to the house, played a familiar role once again when she took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, and anointed Jesus' feet and wiped it with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume, John says, the inference being that it was like incense filling the temple.

Judas Iscariot was at the table as well and he took offence at the waste that Mary was committing by pouring out this lavish expression. The perfume could have been sold for three hundred denarii, he said, and given to the poor.

And of course he was right. But John editorializes at this point and tells us that Judas did not really care about the poor. John says he was stealing money from the common purse. He cared about himself.

So Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought the perfume 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.” I told you that being a guest at table with him would be interesting. *You always have the poor with you*, he said, *but you do not always have me*.

Now this comment is neither a blanket justification for self indulgent extravagance, nor is it an ethical maxim to suggest that the intransigence of poverty should keep us from alleviating its suffering or addressing its root causes. It’s not as if we should give up on the poor. They may be with us always, and our efforts to make life better for those who are poor may be ongoing, but there are still occasions when selfless extravagance is warranted. And the last meal that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus share with Jesus before his death is one such occasion.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus said. “She bought the perfume 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.”

Last week we heard the story of the prodigal son. And you will remember how the parable ends. The elder brother and the father in the parable are standing outside the house, and a party is going on inside where the younger son has been received with rejoicing. “We could not help but celebrate,” the father says, “because this brother of yours was lost but now he is found, he was dead but now is alive.” And the parable ends before we know for sure whether the brother goes in or not.

Well, Judas in today’s story is that older brother. He cannot enter into the joy of the occasion, because he’s all rules and discipline, all boxes and squares. There are no openings in his life, no occasions that call for spontaneity or rejoicing. It’s just the sameness of everyday, repeated endlessly.

Mary, on the other hand, can get caught up in the moment. Judas hears words, she experiences poetry. Judas looks out for himself, Mary loses herself in others.

She understands a reality about life that none of us should miss as we go about our enlightened and self-interested lives. Mary understands that love makes you do extravagant things, things you hadn’t necessarily planned, but things that are important to do nonetheless. Because there is time, and there is time. And how fortunate are those who realize the difference and give themselves to the moment.

William Leaty in a poem on this text writes,

“That each love is time-bound is love’s urgency.
Blessed those careless in spilling
the sweet perfume of their loves.³

There's a lot to be said for reason and order and resonance and rules, the predictable and reliable and rational. Much to be said. But these things you have with you always. What you don't always have is the moment, the occasion, the specialness of now, the uniqueness of this, the ones you are with, the one you are with, the day, the moment, the *yes* that is here.

There is in the Bible two reckonings of time. One is called *chronos*, from the Greek, and we get the words *chronology* and *chronic* from it. *Chronos* time is the ongoing ticking of the clock the unfolding of moments and the passing of hours, and the blending of days that are measured in ordered time. Clock time. Calendar time.

But there is another reckoning of time in the Bible and that is *kairos* time. It is time that is not bound by the clock, not measured by the hour, nor meted out in days. It is time lost in the present.

Its characteristic is that time is suspended, and a little bit of eternity is present in a way that exceeds measurement or defies accounting. Lovers know this kind of time. You spend an afternoon in the park talking as people pass, enchanted with the conversation and lost in the delight of being together. Before you know it, it's dinnertime and you wonder where the hours have gone.

You stand before a great painting, a Breughel or a van Eyck at the Metropolitan and you are lost as you marvel at the deep colors before you, the intricate detail, the strokes of paint on the canvass, the mood and feeling that seeps through the oil. You're there in that room in the painting and you can smell the smoke from the candle and feel the silk in your fingers as you stand there. And a half hour passes and it seems like only a moment.

There are times in life when you get lost in doing something which has no quantitative measurement in time but whose value is found in the qualitative value of being present to it and staying with it and so doing what the heart and the soul requires.

Blessed those careless in spilling the sweet perfume of their loves, Leety writes.

Over the years, as a pastor, I have been invited to some wonderful occasions; meals I have remembered not so much because of the food that was served but the company that was kept and the occasion being celebrated. 50th anniversaries, retirement parties, graduation events, family gatherings for a special occasion, a reunion, or a wedding, someone's 70th birthday party.

I suppose an ethical purist might say lots of homeless people could have been fed on the liquor bill at any one of those occasions, or that there were lots of poor folks going through trash cans looking for leftovers on that same night. And that's true.

But there are some moments worth remembering. Some occasions worth marking. Some lives worth noting. How is it the writer of Ecclesiastes put it? For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to mourn

and a time to dance, a time to weep and a time to laugh. Could that be why Jesus said what he did, that the poor we have with us always, but we do not always have him?

Blessed those careless in spilling the sweet perfume of their loves.

I know for sure that Mary blesses the moment by recognizing it when it has come, the hour of Jesus burial. Six days before the Passover, she chose the Passover lamb and did not realize what it was that she was doing save that she was doing what love would do, taking the most valuable thing she had and lavishing it in love on Jesus, anointing him for his burial. Judas was right, you could have fed a lot of poor people with the money from that perfume. But is there anybody here who would missed the opportunity to anoint Jesus feet with the best fragrance in the house if this were your last or only meal with him?

This past Friday, on the most beautiful, and warmest day of the season in this recent string of beautiful days there was a fire just down 12th street above the Gotham Grill. It was up on the sixth floor or so, smoke pouring out the windows, clearly spreading rapidly. The fire trucks spilled onto all the streets around here, their lights flashing, stopping traffic, disrupting the noonday movement of children leaving the Nursery School, and workmen taking tiles to the roof, and the usual bustle of activity around the neighborhood at that hour.

There were a lot of firefighters who came to that fire. And a few of them climbed an extension ladder and hoisted up hooks and fire hoses and large baskets for bodies if they needed them. Smoke billowed and the fire was real. And I couldn't help but think of those firefighters whose adrenaline must have been rushing, mine was, and who do this kind of thing all the time, risking their lives for people in danger and places on fire. I flashed back to a beautiful September day not so long ago when over three hundred of them died in a moment.⁴ For our sake. *Blessed those careless in spilling the sweet perfume of their loves.* Blessed those careless, indeed.

In the last few years we have had a number of people who have gone into the ministry in this church. Not necessarily young adults but moms and people in second careers and people who have either left business or chosen not to take up a business career which they could have done because they are bright and talented and able. Many of them who have sensed a call to ministry are people who could earn significantly more in salary in one year than what they will ever earn in ministry in a lifetime.

But they have answered that confidence within them that this is what they are called to do, that they could not be true to themselves and not follow where their faith and their heart were taking them. And so they have gone to seminary and submitted to the authority of the presbytery in their training. And they have taken Greek and Hebrew and studied the scriptures, and church history, and theology, and worked in difficult settings with challenging assignments well out of their comfort zone because this is what love requires. It requires losing track of self and finding what is most important for the heart. *And Blessed the careless in spilling the sweet perfume of their loves.*

I think about the devotion that a number of you have undertaken in the care of someone you love who is ill, terminally ill, facing into the jaws of cancer or AIDS or some degenerative condition that was a roller coaster of physical and emotional trials. The times in and out of the hospital, waiting and watching, helpless to do anything except to stand by with comforting words and a reassuring presence.

And then there was the going home and the hospice care, and the rigor of trying to hold home and family and work together somehow. Hoping, praying you get through it. And of course you don't get through it. And of course you do.

Time unfolds as time unfolds, and it seems like eternity, and it seems like but a second before it is gone, before they are gone. And whatever may be said, it must be said that it was a not a waste, the sacrifices, the sleeplessness, the worry, the love, because it was in fact the most noble and important time you may ever live, to give yourself in love for another. *Blessed the careless in spilling the sweet perfume of their loves.*

Howard Thurman was a genius with words and a loving father. His accomplishments as an African American growing up in the old South are remarkable. He was an educator, professor of theology at Howard University, Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, and an honorary canon of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine here in New York.

He tells a story that only love can tell. It took place on one of his visits to his hometown of Daytona Beach in the late 1930's. It was, of course, the segregated South in those days. Thurman was Dean of Howard University in Washington, D.C. and he was showing his young daughters Olive and Anne the community in which he had grown up. They took a walk down to the riverfront in Daytona Beach and he showed his girls the processional path on the day of his baptismal service in the Halifax River which he had often described to them. Eventually, they passed the playground of the white public schools and as soon as the girls saw the swings they jumped for joy. "Look Daddy, lets go over and swing!"

Thurman writes, "This was the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face sooner or later. What do you say to your child at the crucial moment of primary encounter?"

"You can't swing in those swings," Thurman said.

"Why?" the girls asked.

"When we get home and have some lemonade I will tell you." When they got home the girls pressed for the answer and Thurman said,

"It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. At present, only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida – it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you

are.”⁵ Only love could have explained that sadness with such dignity. *Blessed those careless in spilling the sweet perfume of their loves.*

There are moments in our lives when being present to what is happening is the most important thing there is. To lavish your love on another in such a way that their worth is treasured and the moment is acknowledged as so precious, so important.

In a few more days, at the end of this Lenten season, we will see that truth dramatically portrayed as a man pours out his life and his love for us on a cross, and shows us the great depth of God’s love. His is the measure of all such selflessness and sacrifice.

And blessed those careless in spilling the sweet perfume of their loves, as he did.

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¹ Luke 18:5

² Luke 11:37

³**The Presbyterian Outlook**, (March 23-30, 1998) p. 2.

⁴ 343 to be exact.

⁵ Howard Thurman, **With Head and Heart**, (New York: Harvest Book, 1979) 97.