

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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March 21, 2010
5th Sunday in Lent
John 12:1-8

Practicing Joy

Some people, myself included, like to read the obituaries in the daily newspaper, whether we know the people involved or not. We have multiple reasons for this—just in case the deceased was related to someone we know, or maybe just because we are interested in the stories of people’s lives. Sometimes the most inspiring stories are lived by the most ordinary people. Not long ago I was reading an obituary for someone I didn’t know, but when I finished, I had the feeling of “I wish I had known him.” The phrase that caught my attention was in the middle of the description of his last years of life, when health concerns severely limited his activity. “He saw something beautiful in every day,” the obituary read. Wow. To see something beautiful in every day is to live a hope-filled life, a joyful life. Was that a gift he was given, or was it a discipline which became a lifelong, daily habit?

Probably both. The gift was the gift of faith; the habit came from the discipline of practicing joy.

In this season of Lent, we are focusing on the attitudes and habits that scripture tells us Jesus practiced, those ways of living in the world that mark us as his disciples. We have learned to practice obedience to God alone, steadfastness in our journey of faith, humility and repentance, and graciousness in forgiveness. This week our scripture reminds us to practice joy, to live joyfully in this beautiful world—even in the face of death. Often the season of Lent is understood as a somber time in which to reflect on Jesus’ crucifixion. And often the Christian life is understood as a serious life, with little or no room for the pleasures of life in the world. This week’s reading reminds us that beyond death there is reason for hopefulness and joy, and that living the Christian life means living a joyful life. In the midst of Lenten seriousness, this day celebrates the resurrection and the goodness of the created world we live in. If you want to follow Jesus and live like him, practice being joyful! Practice living as one who delights in the wonders of this world and trusts in the resurrection promises.

Jesus’ friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus knew the resurrection promises to be true in their lives. Their dinner party surely was in honor of the miracle which Jesus had wrought in their lives. Lazarus had died and been entombed for three days before Jesus arrived, yet when Jesus said “Lazarus, come out!” his life was restored. His sisters Mary and Martha wanted to host a party to celebrate. Surely they prepared the best food, brought out the best tableware, dressed in their finest clothes and welcomed their friends with great joy. As we know from elsewhere in the scriptures, Martha was probably the one who knew how to put on the dinner. But Mary was the one with the gift of devotion, so she went to her cupboards and took out the most expensive gift she owned, a lavish, sensual, earthy gift for Jesus of imported perfume. And she gave it to him with a gesture that symbolized her infinite gratitude, her complete discipleship, her total devotion to him. She anointed his feet in life in a way usually reserved for the dead, and broke all convention to let down her hair and use it for wiping his feet. The fragrance of the perfume, and of her worshipful thanksgiving, filled the room.

But the voice of reason, sensibleness, and moderation intruded on her act of joy. “Shouldn’t that perfume have been sold and the money given to the poor?” It’s a reasonable

question, a question asked by good stewards. There are other places in the scriptures which validate this question, such as when the prophet Amos expresses God's anger at worship without concern for justice. "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21, 24) Or when Jesus advised the rich young man that if he truly wanted to be a disciple, he should sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. (Mt 19:21) But in this story, the gospel writer has the advantage of hindsight. He, and we, know Judas to be the one who will take a bribe and betray Jesus, and the one who embezzled from the common purse. His motives were impure, so his question was tainted. And Jesus answered him with words that saw through the veneer of good stewardship, the artificial concern for the poor. "You always have the poor with you," he said, recalling for these good Jews the words of Deuteronomy which they all know: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in the land.'" (Deut 15:11)

Mary's act of devotion models for us what it means to delight in the beautiful things of this world. To take pleasure in the sensuous gifts, to share them freely and graciously, to enjoy what the eyes can see, the ears can hear, the nose can smell, the tongue can taste and the skin can feel. Sometimes we fall into believing that Christian piety requires us to ignore material pleasures and focus ourselves solely on what is spiritual. The balance is important, of course. But God made this world as a place of great beauty. It doesn't matter where one lives, beauty is there. Whether it is on a large scale, like the mountains and sky and land around us, or on a small scale, like the flower which cracks through an urban sidewalk or the bird whose warble softens the harshness of traffic noise, there are lavish gifts for our senses wherever we are. We are made to enjoy our embodiedness, to embrace and to touch one another, to find pleasure in our sexuality, to smile and laugh around tables overflowing with good food and drink. As scripture says, God saw the creation and called it very good. So as created beings, made in God's image, we do the same.

And as those who follow Jesus, there is even more reason to celebrate the world's joys. For we believe that the darkness of the world has been overcome, the sin which is real and pervasive is not victorious, the death which is part of every life is not the end of the story. As Christians, we know a story of new life triumphing over sin and death. The Easter story, the story of Christ's resurrection and the promise that everlasting life is for us, too, is more than enough reason to enjoy the world. It is this story which makes us hopeful people; this is the gift which calls us to the discipline of practicing joyful living, as Mary demonstrated in her extravagant anointing of Jesus' feet, and as her sister Martha did when she professed her faith that Jesus was the resurrection and the life: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ." (John 11:25-27) Their brother Lazarus was proof enough for them that in Christ, God was beginning a new creation even more glorious than the one they already knew, turning tears into joy. So even before Christ's resurrection, they were celebrating and making joyful living their daily practice.

Even in the face of death. For this kind of joy never denies death's reality nor sin's presence. This kind of joy looks sin and death in the eye, perhaps with fear and trembling, for sure with grief and realism, but always with faith and hope. This kind of joy is the joy that sustained Ena Zizi, the 69-year-old Haitian woman who was buried in the National Cathedral in Port au Prince on January 12. When rescuers were searching for survivors,

she sang to tell them she was there, and when she was pulled from the rubble seven days after the earthquake, seven days with no light and nothing to eat or drink, she was still singing. Her rescuers cried, and then they applauded. (described by Paul Jeffrey, "Out of the Rubble," *The Christian Century*, March 23, 2010, p. 13)

My friends, to sing in the face of death is a gift of faith and a habit of living acquired by practicing joy. It is a witness to our good God, who wants us to enjoy life and its richness, and to our Savior Jesus Christ, who conquered death and ended the tyranny of sin. To sing in the face of death is like pouring out our most expensive perfume on the feet of our Lord. The sound of our voices, or the fragrance of the perfume, blesses those who are nearby. And there are always those in need nearby, so open your hand and share with joy.

In Izak Dinesen's short story, made into an award-winning film, *Babette's Feast*, a colony of pious Christians receive an extravagant gift of love from their resident French chef when she makes them a gourmet dinner fit for kings and queens. They are not quite sure how to receive this gift; they think the champagne must be some kind of lemonade, and they have no words for the turtle soup and caviar and roast quail. But the lavish gift stirs something in their hearts. The climax of the story is not the feast, but the transformation that begins to take place around the table. Instead of a tight-lipped silence, they begin to talk, and to listen to one another. They recall the words of love which called them into community. They forgive old wrongs and remember the miracles they have experienced together, and most of all, they celebrate God's grace.

For as extravagant as we might be in our gift-giving, our praise, we never even begin to be as generous as our God. Mary's perfume, Ena Zizi's singing, and Babette's feast are small expressions of gratitude, human-scale reflections of the grace of God. They celebrate life and the earth and God's goodness and love the best we are able. And they share God's grace and our hope in Jesus Christ with those around us. But our best is tiny next to God's generosity.

So here's the Lenten message of the day for us all. Open your hands, open your hearts to receive from God and to give in return. Practice joy in receiving, and joy in giving. Throw the questions of Judas and his cohorts back at them by living with more generosity and justice than they ever imagined possible. And live like true disciples of Jesus, joyful in the face of death.