

## “Eyes on the Prize”

Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

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“It’s been a pretty crazy week.” I made this comment to someone earlier this week, and it dawned on me that I... or the one who tries to keep those ‘crazy weeks’ from driving us BOTH ‘crazy,’ my **better half**... seem to say that a LOT. But this one seemed even more so. Guess it started last Sunday night, with a long-time, very active member of the LC church passing away after a lengthy illness. Which meant several visits to their house for pastoral care and planning for the funeral, which was Friday afternoon. Plus a Saturday morning graveside service. There were also several visits to area hospitals, and a nursing home. Worship planning for 3 Sundays, including Holy Week. Tutoring at Fairview (Elementary School). All of this complicated, and frustrated, by computer problems at church. Oh yes, and there was also a trip to the ‘tax man.’ As we all know, ‘Tis the season! And THEN we come to that other little responsibility of mine... the *sermon* for Sunday. You know... that ‘Job One’ for those ‘two hours a week’ I work... ;)

So WHY do I share this with you? For you to extend your sympathy or gratitude... or to ‘pat me on the back’ and say ‘what a good pastor you are?’ NO! For one thing, my week was no different than that of countless of my colleagues in ministry. No different than perhaps the week that some of you have had. But as I pondered the words of Paul, I thought about all the reasons that he could have received a ‘pat on the back’ for all the ways he had proven himself to be a ‘good’ follower of God. And yet, how *meaningless* all of that ‘status’ was. All that was important was his **relationship with Christ.**

I also reflected on the reaction of Jesus’ followers (Judas in this passage from John, but in Matthew and Mark, other disciples) to the seemingly wasteful use of resources in Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet with expensive fragrant oil... money that could have been put to much better use in serving God’s people. To which Jesus replied that Mary had actually done a very GOOD thing... as it was done in order to care for her Lord at the end of His life. Her extravagant act was powerful evidence that all that was important was her **relationship with Christ.**

Whether it’s the ways that we attempt to BE someone who is seen as a follower of God... or the manner in which we seek to DO things that God will be pleased with... these are not so much the point. It’s not so much about what I have done FOR Jesus... but rather, what I

have done WITH Jesus. Being a Christian is not merely about **following rules** or **respectful actions**... but more importantly, our Christian faith is about relationship. Relationships with Jesus, and His brothers and sisters. Let us consider how God calls us to not merely be concerned with the **practice** of our faith... but the **person** of our faith. How we are called to keep our **“Eyes on the Prize”** ...our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

First, let us gaze through the ‘eyes’ of Mary. This is NOT Mary, the mother of Jesus; NOT Mary Magdalene, that loyal follower of the Lord. Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Yes, THAT ‘Lazarus’... the one **“whom he (Jesus) had raised from the dead”** (John 12:1). This family that has been so deeply ‘touched’ by the ministry of Jesus hold a dinner party for him. And in the very middle of dinner, with all of the honored guests... including the *most* ‘honored’ one... gathered around the table, Mary took some **“perfume made from nard,”** which was a fragrant ointment, and **“anointed Jesus’ feet.”** And no small amount of it. No ‘little dab’ll do you.’ A **pound** of it! We’re talking expensive, and *extensive* stuff here.

And then, to add to the dismay that such great cost was incurred for a ‘foot rub,’ Mary then goes on to ‘humiliate’ herself in front of her guests by remaining at the feet of Jesus as she **“wiped them with her hair.”** (John 12:3) Irregardless if Judas had impure, ulterior motives or not, the fact remained that Mary had gone to great expense...of money and self... in order to make such a public ‘spectacle’ of herself. What ABOUT all those ‘better uses’ of these resources...?

The value of this experience isn’t in the ways it does NOT address the needs of people, but how it DOES address the *importance* of Jesus, who is the ultimate ‘healing balm’ for hurting people. Why would Mary go to such lengths to expend her financial resources and her human pride? One reason would be **GRATITUDE.** Because this miracle-worker from Galilee had **saved her brother’s life!** In the same way that the Father of the Prodigal Son last week would celebrate his son’s return, she could well had said, *“I had to celebrate! I had to show my gratitude to this Jesus! For my brother was dead, but now he is alive! He was lost, but now is found.”* Like Mary, how much gratitude do WE show to Jesus for His saving of OUR lives, and those whom we love? How many ways might WE say ‘thank you’ to our Lord and Savior for the healing we are given... in mind, body, and spirit...?

Mary, in her pouring of this precious commodity on Jesus' not only expresses gratitude, but also proclaims his **identity**. She bears witness to his holy status as 'priest, prophet, and king.' That image of her anointing the Christ would have reminded those faithful Jews of the manner in which great leaders, priests, and kings would be honored and empowered in their tradition. In David's words ***"How very good and pleasant it is when God's kindred people live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down the beard of Aaron."*** (Ps 133:1-2) (Aaron, the great prophet, high priest, and brother of Moses).

In her NOT-so-simple act, Mary recognized Jesus' status, and the honor that was due Him. Something many of the 'religious leaders' of the time would refuse to do. ('Pride before the fall...?') In those words of the Psalm, How 'good and pleasant' it indeed IS when we, 'God's kindred people,' seek to 'live together in unity.' We demonstrate our unity as God's people when we... (at Welsh) invite our community, and fellow Christians, to join us at a Lenten luncheon... or when we gather together to sing with some oft-forgotten children of God at a nursing home // (at L.C.) open the doors of our church to the community to celebrate a graduation' ceremony for a friend... or when we go out to a 'rice field' in S. L.C. on a Saturday morning to hand out water bottles or play with children... or tutor a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader at an 'inner-city' elementary school. These are just a FEW of the ways that we are to attest to the **true identity** of Jesus as our Savior... especially before those who may not acknowledge Him as such...

One other important way that I believe points to the type of relationship that Mary had with Jesus... from which we can learn... was the manner in which she cared for the feet of Jesus. ***"(She) wiped them with her hair."*** (John 12:3) The Greek for this word ***"wiped"*** is actually the same verb form used for Jesus' act of service in the Upper Room the day before his death, when he ***"wiped"*** the feet of the Disciples after having washed them. Mary's act of **humble service** and care for the One she loved was not so unlike that of Jesus for the disciples whom HE loved so dearly. **What acts of kindness and humble service are WE being asked to do...in the pattern of our holy example, Jesus... as well as His servant Mary...?**

But how much are we like Mary, anyway? Humble servants for whom gratitude and 'sitting at the feet of Jesus' seem to come so easy? As I look around this room, I think I see a lot more 'Pauls.' Leaders... both in community and in church. Long-time elders, with long, rich,

deep 'connections' to the Presbyterian church. Cradle roll, baptized as an infant. One of many generations who have, in some cases, quite literally, *'laid the foundations'* of the church. Throughout your life you have been participants in VBS, youth groups, mission trips, Sunday School. In the words of the great Apostle, ***"as to righteousness under the law, blameless."*** (Phil. 3:6)

... ***"Yet..."*** Paul says. Ahhh... one of those 'blue light special' words. Pay attention here. Like 'so that' or 'therefore.' ***"Yet, whatever gains I had... I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."*** (Philippians 3:7-8) Every 'gain' Paul has had in life... from his exemplary life in the synagogue, to his status in the community, to every physical blessing he has received... he count as 'loss.' He even goes as far as to say that ***"I regard all things as rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ and be found in him."*** (Phil. 3:8-9) As you may recall, that word 'rubbish' can be translated as 'dung'... 'horse hockey,' 'cow patties,' b.s. Paul is saying that 'No matter what earthly treasures and accolades I may have received in life, it doesn't come up to a 'hill of *beans*' compared to knowing Jesus!' The Son of God through whom we inherit much greater riches that our finite minds could ever imagine. Paul's assessment of what makes our lives TRULY valuable could be equated with a popular secular statement: ***"It's not WHAT you know... but WHO you know."***

NOW, while I believe that this is true only to a certain extent in a worldly way, I think it does point to one that might have more everlasting truth: *"It's one thing to know about Jesus... it's another to actually know Jesus"*... Most of you are aware of a favorite hymn of the church, *"What a Friend we have in Jesus."* A friend is one whom we know well. How? By spending time with him/her. Speaking, and listening. Sharing with. Laughing with. Crying with. The same truth that applies to the 'friend' we have in Jesus...

Many of you (the church in L.C.) lost a friend this week by the name of Lois Ferguson. She was a gifted, loyal friend and church member who was dedicated to her family, and her God. Because of all that she had given in service to the Lord, it was very important to me to honor her commitment in the SoWR that celebrated her life. And particularly in the homily that I would give at that service. Because of the time I spent in support of Lois' family, I got a much later start in considering today's message. Which caused me great concern. For I take quite

seriously the importance of the Proclamation of God's Word, especially in this context. I am a 'wordsmith' for Christ, a responsibility I don't take lightly. But as I attempted to put a few 'coherent' thoughts together, I had an 'epiphany.' NO, not the one that comes right after Christmas. ☺ I was reminded... by God?... that it doesn't really matter just how well-crafted, how articulate, how witty or animated the message I bring to you may be... be it on Sunday morning or at a special service. The most important thing, does it help you... and ME... in our **relationship with Christ**. It's not about what I do FOR Christ... but WITH Christ. To that end, I leave you with one of my favorite passages from Scripture... from the book of Hebrews:

***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,<sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of<sup>[b]</sup> the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."** (Hebrews 12:1-3)*

Oh 'great cloud of witnesses,' don't 'grow weary' or 'lose heart', but keep looking to Jesus, through whom your faith and life begins and ends. In Paul's words, ***"forget what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead."*** (Phil. 3:14) Simply put, keep your **eyes on the prize** of Jesus Christ...

**Charge:** By her gift, Mary **prepared** for the day of Jesus' burial. By our prayers and presence... by the 'gift' of our very SELVES... we too **prepare** for this Lenten turn down the 'home stretch' of Palm Sunday and Holy Week. We continue the journey to the cross. Just as His first disciples attempted to walk with Him... not always successfully... may we know that we too must attempt to walk with Christ. And the 'Good News' is, we do not do so ALONE...