

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

March 13, 2016; the 5th Sunday in Lent

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8.

How Close?

As Jesus moves into the final days before his arrest, he goes to a familiar and important place...a place where he came to know himself better...though what he experienced through relationships.

On the eve of momentous events, Jesus comes to a place that has been a home to him, with his friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

They give a dinner for him...and what a dinner it is...for at the table is Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

Like most moments, most scenes in Jesus' life, this one looks very human...friends having dinner together...but divinity and aspects of eternity are all over this scene...this story.

Now one can argue, as I often do, that all of life is divine, that all of life has eternal significance...that everytime friends gather, God is in the midst of us.

But this meal--- was something special...Lazarus was dead...and yet he lives...there he is, sitting at the table...as bold a statement...a living embodiment of God's saving power...God's saving power experienced through Jesus!

This is a dinner party that foreshadows what will happen...the raising of Lazarus was what really got Jesus noticed by those in power...what intensified fear that Jesus could be a challenge to the establishment and intensified the desire to be rid of him.

Martha and Mary are there...the devoted disciples...Martha is serving, and Mary is again at the feet of Jesus, anointing him with the perfume.

Judas is there...the voice of negativity...the one who does not

understand...the one who will betray the prince of peace the Lord of love.

It is all here...on this 5th Sunday in Lent, as we too are on the eve of Holy Week, we see the seeds of both the wheat and the weeds in this dinner scene.

Last Sunday, I spoke about “coming to ourselves,” of realizing our true nature...our deepest truth being that we are created in God’s image, and therefore being worthy of respect...respect for ourselves and respect from others.

And that no matter how lost we might feel or even be, God is always with us, welcoming us home to ourselves and into God’s embrace.

When Mary takes that oil and goes to Jesus, kneeling at his feet, anointing his feet with oil and wiping them with her hair, she knows who she is.

Through her relationship with Jesus...with Christ in her life...she is self-possessed, focused, brave, able to do something that was shocking in its intimacy and disregard for the stand rules of behavior.

Being in relationship with God, knowing we are for God, can lead us to do some surprising things...things that don’t necessarily make sense to our friends or in the context of our lives.

Coming to ourselves, our true selves as God’s beloved, often has a cost.

The grace and benefits of living our lives as the people God has created us to be, and living for God, far outweighs the cost, but nonetheless there is a cost.

In her humorous but very real way, Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her book, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, addresses the cost:

I recently was asked by an earnest young seminarian during a Q&A, “Pastor Nadia, what do you do personally to get closer to God?”

Before I even realized I was saying it, I replied,
‘What? Nothing.

Sounds like a horrible idea to me, trying to get *closer* to God’.

Half the time, I wish God would leave me alone.

Getting closer to God might mean getting told to love someone I don’t
even like, or give away even more of my money.

It might mean letting some idea or dream that is dear to me get ripped
away.”¹

How close do we really want to be to God?

With Lent coming to its conclusion, we have a great opportunity, an
invitation from God, we spend time with Jesus, to walk with
Jesus through his final week, what we now call Holy Week.
The Church exists to help us get closer to God...in many ways...in helping
others, in being in relationship with each other...and by providing
holy spaces, places, times, and during Holy Week, to be with
Jesus before he is resurrected to be the Christ of all time and space.

How close do we want to get?

On Palm Sunday, we line the street with all those who cheer
the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem...we also have some of Good
Friday next Sunday because at a point the Church make a
concession to the culture...the culture being that it is hard
for people to come to church during the week.

But if you can come on Maundy Thursday, you will come close to God who
taught us to care for each other and promised to care for us always
through the Eucharist.

It just so happens, maybe this is not just a chance thing, that our group
that cooks and serves the meal at the Veteran’s Shelter will be
cooking and serving that night.

They are always open to having new people help.

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God In All The Wrong People*, Epub., Convergent Books, 2015, p. 8.

Perhaps you will wash the feet of others by serving a meal to those in need on Maundy Thursday March 24th.

You might be able to make it back from the Veterans' Shelter in time for the stripping of the Altar...the way we prepare for Good Friday...removing all that is ornamental to create a stark space for a dark day.

How close do you want to get?

Good Friday brings the grief; being close to Jesus on this day is painful.

But when has being close to someone only been joyful?

Truly knowing someone, being close, involves knowing their pain too.

There is no new life without death; there is no resurrection joy without the pain of the cross.

Mary got close to that pain in anointing Jesus with perfume/oil -- as the women would after he had died.

There was a cost to what she did, perhaps in her own heart as she felt the pain to come, and as represented by Judas' questioning of her action.

Ah Judas, questioning, trying to spoil the moment; but Jesus gets right to the heart of what is happening...this perfume is to be saved for his burial.

Then we have those words that have been so misunderstood and used to defend not caring for the poor, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The point of this is not "don't worry that there are poor among you...it will always be this way." But rather...be aware of the time...of what is happening right in front of you...caring for Jesus in his death, soon to be death, is caring for the poverty of his humanity, seeing all the poor and the oppressed in him.

When he is gone; the poor will still be here to help...and help we must, because it is the right thing to do and because as we saw

the poor in Jesus...we see the Christ in the poor among us. As Stephen Shoemaker states in his commentary, "Jesus clearly was not counseling neglect of the poor. His words were a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11, whose message is unmistakable:

'For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand...to the needy and the poor, in the land' (RSV).

Ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas comments: 'The poor that we always have with us is Jesus.

It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given.'

The true church always has the poor in its midst, always treasures the life of the poor."²

How close do we want to be to God?

In these scene with Mary at the feet of Jesus and Judas looking on with condemnation, we see both sides of discipleship...both are with Jesus...one devoted and one self-concerned.

As we seek to be closer to God/to Christ, we will most likely see both Mary and Judas within ourselves...sometimes desiring such closeness that we are right there in devotion...and other times standing at a distance.

God through the power of the Holy Spirit is always inviting us to move closer.

In these last days before Easter, God invites us to be with Jesus in his last days...to come close to God through the One who came so close to us as to know our lives, living and dying as one of us.

A word that I have not used in this sermon is hope...but hope is part of this Lenten journey.

²David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol. 2, H. Stephen Shoemaker, "Homiletical Perspective," Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Epub, Loc. 5209 of 19741.

I will conclude with a prayer from Joyce Rupp entitled "Hope," from her book, *Prayers to Sophia*.

Delight of my Heart,

I grow ever more grateful
as I pause to look over my shoulder,
reflecting on days gone by, seeing how your counsel never
leaves me.

Perhaps it is the terribly clean dawn
sweeping over the January land
that gifts my heart with a strong sense of hope,
of promise, of blessing.

Somewhere far down inside
I feel cherished and welcomed by you.
I believe you are drawing me ever closer,
with the whisper of "come" in the air.

Eternal Presence, all afire in me,
you breathe upon my embers, they glow.
Your ever-reaching love holds me
as I learn again to not be afraid.

Just as the light has given me morning,
so you, Holy One, have given me hope.
Praise to you for drawing me forward,
encouraging me to bid farewell to the past.

Continue to blow on the embers.
Light the fire again and again. Flame it bright and full.
Gift me with surrender in love so that I can be more fully yours.³
Amen.

³ Joyce Rupp, *Prayers to Sophia, Deepening Our Relationship with Holy Wisdom*, Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2010, Epub., Loc. 254-259 of 593.