

Lent 5C 03 April 2022
John 12:1-8
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you in abundance from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it 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."

Have you ever done something for someone, no strings attached, with no rhyme or reason, and no expectation of anything in return? You just went and did something without even thinking about it. There was no why to what you were doing. You were just doing what you were doing, because that's what you were doing.

What if we were to live our whole lives without a why? What if we existed simply because we existed? What if there was no motive to our existence; to be noticed, to be thanked, or praised? What if we fragranced the world because we couldn't do anything but fragrance the world? What if we lived and acted without a why?

I like the idea of living without a why. I'd love to give and love unconditionally. But it's harder than it sounds. We live in a world of economy, exchange, and transaction. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. We live in a world in which you pay for what you want. There's no such thing as a free lunch so to speak. We're expected to return the favour, pay off the debt, reciprocate in some way. In short, you get what you pay for. And these are some of the ways we transact our lives:

- We exchange our time for money, sacrifice our families for success, and trade our dreams for pragmatism.
- We receive gifts and feel indebted, obligated to return the favour, or at least send a thank-you note. Even the best-intentioned gifts can leave the receiver with an unintended debt of gratitude. And think about how you've felt if you haven't received acknowledgment after giving someone a gift?
- Maybe you've sent or given flowers after an argument. Were you giving a gift or working an angle?
- Maybe you've experienced awkwardness over the payment of a bill for a café, restaurant or pub meal? "You paid last time, it's my turn" or "I'll get it today, you get it next time."
- Everyone knows that generous donors expect big returns. And it's not just in politics; it works wherever there's a sphere of influence that can be manipulated.
- Some people become suspicious about why someone does something for them, wondering, "What's in it for them?"
- It even exists in the church and our faith. Theologians call it "the economy of salvation." Pray often, do good things and you too can have salvation. Some Christians believe that their prayers and good behaviour are the currency that pays for God's favour.

These aren't judgements on anyone. I'm simply making the observation that there're thousands of ways in which we daily transact the business of life. We can't escape it. It's hard, maybe impossible, to give a pure gift. Economies are a part of our world and our lives. I love being a pastor and I'm definitely not in it for the money, but I still need to be paid. I'm not suggesting economies are wrong or that we need to get rid of them; we can't, but maybe we need to be more aware of them and the influence they have over us.

Now, I know we don't always do things for personal gain. There're times when we do something simply for the sake of doing it; things like love, forgiveness, truth, hospitality, justice, compassion. Each are examples of something being affirmed for what it is, not for what it might achieve or accomplish. There's no why.

I think that's what's going on with Mary in today's gospel. She loves because she loves. She anoints because she anoints. She fragrances because she fragrances. There's no why. It's pure gift, "grace upon grace." There's absolutely nothing in it for her. It's unconditional, without measure or calculation. Indeed, it even looks reckless and irresponsible. Mary's not invested in a result or seeking personal gain or notoriety. She's just doing what she's doing because that's what she's doing. Her actions break the chains of means and ends. And it makes no sense to Judas or any other economist.

Gift stands in contrast to economy. Mary stands in contrast to Judas. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" I'll go out on a limb here; you make up your own minds. I don't know what Judas' real motive was. Maybe he was a thief and wanted it all for himself. Maybe he really did want to help the poor. Maybe the gospel writer sought revenge (another economy) and took the opportunity to portray Judas in a negative light. There're many ways to interpret Judas' motive.

Whichever way you look at it, Judas is calculating and pragmatic. He knows the market. He's an investor looking for a return. He wants to turn Mary's gift into a profit. Judas has a why. His thinking is influenced by means and ends. In the economies of our life, we're no different. Everything has a why, life is calculable, and we become calculating, expecting a return on our investment whether that investment is money, time, love, or a good deed.

I'm reluctant to make conclusions about Mary or Judas. The risk is falling into the trap of thinking Mary is good, Judas is bad; Mary is right, Judas is wrong, as though I'm the final arbiter of virtue. But the reality is, both play tug-o-war in my life constantly. There're times when I act like Judas and times when I act like Mary, and they're constantly at war inside me.

What if we thought of both Judas and Mary as two aspects of our lives, two ways of living and relating, rather than identifying them as opposites? What if both Mary and Judas live within us? What if they exemplify our charitable self and our economic self, our unconditioned life and our conditioned life? Think about times when you've reacted as Mary and other times, Judas. Think about when you've acted without a why, and times when you've calculated every little detail.

We don't need to choose one over the other, gift or economy, Mary or Judas; but realise that we live in the tension between the two. That tension is the call to be discerning and thoughtful about how we respond to others and engage with life. That tension pushes us to look within ourselves at our motives and desires, and, that tension reveals that Mary and Judas, gift and economy are interwoven. It reminds us that the fragrance of life can be neither bought nor sold. Our faith and salvation cost us nothing. They're pure, priceless gifts; yet, they cost God everything - the life of his very own precious Son, Jesus. To him be all glory, honour, and praise forever and ever. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.