

## Lent 5 Year C – God’s New Thing

The scene we have in today’s gospel shows up in the other gospels but the details differ. In the other accounts of this party, the woman is unnamed but not today. In John’s gospel we hear that it is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. You remember these two sisters, Martha is the one who serves and Mary is the contemplative sister that seems to hang on every word of Jesus.

These three siblings, Lazarus, Martha and Mary, are very close friends of Jesus and in John chapter 11 which precedes today’s gospel, we hear of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. We also hear that the chief priests are concerned about how the people are responding to Jesus and will plan to kill Jesus and Lazarus if they attend the Passover in Jerusalem. There is a tendency to demonize the chief priests but they aren’t bad people. They are religious people who are operating out of their fears. The chief priests have decided that if they don’t kill Jesus and Lazarus, Rome might take action against the Jews. Next week we will hear of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem. So the dye has been cast for Holy Week.

But today we hear that “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.” The contrast is striking between Lazarus recently leaving the tomb with the knowledge that Jesus’ will soon be placed in his tomb. The events seem to take on the feel of a good by tour by Jesus and the disciples; stopping for dinner with best friends before entering Jerusalem and entering into death.

Then the unthinkable happens. Or as we hear God say in Isaiah “I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it!” I can imagine that this meal is one of friends talking and having a good time when suddenly God’s new thing appears and surprises. “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.” Let’s be clear about a few things -- women didn’t anoint men and good women didn’t unravel their hair at a dinner party nor did they wipe a man’s feet. Also anointing someone’s head was common but anointing the feet was unusual unless a person had died. A new thing has occurred and I imagine that all conversation in the room stopped in mid-sentence.

The words from Judas sound like things we’ve heard Peter say when he didn’t know how to respond to what he had seen. Judas, like Peter and most if not all of the disciples appear to be practical people. Mary, taking on the role of the prophet, isn’t practical at all but instead gives Jesus an outrageous gift by way of an incredibly unpractical act. (I have read that a pound of nard would have cost a laborer a year’s wages.) So we are presented with another contrast; the practical men following Jesus concerned about costs and being prudent and the unpractical Mary who silently gives a lavish gift through a lavish act. God is once again doing a new thing. Keep this story in mind eleven days from now when we hear of Jesus washing his followers feet before we wash each other’s feet on Maundy Thursday.

It occurs to me that everyone in that room that night was nervous about what they felt might occur when they get to Jerusalem. They are likely trying to ignore or hide their fears through idle chatter around good food and drink. That ends with Mary’s action of intimacy and deep love and devotion. I think that Judas was anxious and only thinking what everyone else was thinking when he demanded “why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Jesus doesn’t rebuke him. He simply tells Judas to leave her alone because she bought the nard for his death. There it is for those in the room and for us; that unspoken thing. Jesus knows he is heading to his death. And Mary’s action couldn’t be ignored

nor could the smell that filled the house that night be ignored. It was a reminder of the anointing that occurred at a person's death. Contrast the stink associated with death with the rich smell of the oil. Contrast Judas' nervous outburst with Mary's intimate action of devotion. God is doing a new thing!

Jesus' reminder to the room and Judas in particular that there will always be the poor isn't a flippant remark but a statement that this new thing that God is doing which culminates in his resurrection will be the reason that we are always called to respond to the needs of the poor.

Every new thing that God does is done out of love and almost always surprises me when I pay attention to the experience. I think God is doing new things always but I don't notice most of the time because of my fears or, like Judas, because I am focused on being outraged by what is going on around me. But God calls us to take risks to engage with God's new thing and to look beyond our outrage to see God's new thing at work in the world.

Paul gets that God is always doing a new thing and we hear that in the passage today from Philippians. Whatever it was Paul experienced that day on the road to Damascus turned his world upside down.

For years I thought that this passage was Paul boasting about himself. He is but with a point. He tells us that while he was born to privilege and persecuted the church, after the incident on the road none of that mattered. God was creating a new thing and Paul understood that everything had changed because of the faith of Christ note that I said faith of Christ, not Paul's faith Christ. At some point after the blinding light, Paul understood that he should forget the past and focus on the future. He knew that focusing on who he had been would prevent him from perceiving God's new thing in the world. Paul realized that God isn't some sort of accountant that compares our good actions against our bad acts to arrive at some sort of holy cost/benefit analysis. No, Paul knew that God calls us to love and love generously. Paul didn't know where he was heading but he was driven to see and be a part of God's new thing.

Our call is to look around to see and to ask where God might be at work on a new thing where we least expect in our lives and in our community. Look around in the knowledge that, like Mary and like Paul, God is using us to do generous and unexpected things in this world.

May you see and participate in God's new thing.

AMEN