

“Rules Made to Be Broken”

Rev. David Gregory

April 3, 2022

Lent 5



Readings

John 12:1-8

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, “Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces.” He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them.

Jesus said, “Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me.”

“I Tried to Haggle God”

a poem by Chelan Harkin in *Let Us Dance!*

I tried to haggle God
for good deeds
and a bundle of prayers —
She wasn't having it.

I tried to haggle God
for complex philosophies
and impressive recitations —
no deal.

I tried to haggle God
for following all the rules
and acting the most pure —
nothing.

I got frustrated
and was about to leave the marketplace
when she said,
“I'll trade Myself
for a diamond
of your tears,
a ruby of sorrow
from the trove of your heart,
any gem
of your joy.”

It is one of the most dramatic and poignant moments in all of scripture, at least in my estimation. It involves three siblings who were longtime intimate friends of Jesus. It is a final visit to a home where he apparently visited them numerous times, and this time he is accompanied by his disciples. It is the meshing of his followers with his family of choice, a confrontation perhaps between his ragtag band of impoverished fishermen and a family of some means who have the capability of hosting and feeding all of them. They are outside of Jerusalem in the village of Bethany, and about to undergo the greatest trial of their lives. Where the disciples are concerned, everything they have striven for, all the messianic hopes for a better future, all the teaching and healing and compassion for the masses – everything appears now to be hanging in the balance. Judas is in their midst, just as he will be in the last Passover within a few short days, before heading out to inform Jesus's opponents of his whereabouts in the Garden.

This gospel reading tells the story of a serious heart-wrenching moment, a sense of foreboding, a foreshadowing of torture and death that faces Jesus in Jerusalem. It is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, who really gets it. Perhaps they've discussed this, but maybe not. Maybe she's just tuned to her own intuition – what we might call her internal, spiritual GPS. Whatever the case, she does something incredibly loving, deeply intimate, and terribly wasteful. A container of highly expensive ointment, something these working-class fishermen might never have seen before up close, this treasure is brought out, broken open, and Mary massages Jesus feet with it, then wipes off the excess with her hair.

Culturally speaking this seems an odd thing to do, especially in modern terms. It seems overly intimate, suggestively if not overtly sexual, but without looking through our puritanical American lenses, we're probably seeing an expression of honor and appreciation in the culture of the ancient Middle East, a recognition of the great danger that lies ahead. Mary is the one who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to his teaching, angering her sister who was busy serving food. Jesus said to Martha on that earlier visit that Mary had chosen something greater for herself, recognizing her greater spiritual sensitivity that apparently was not affected in the least by the indignance of her sister. As Thoreau might put it, Mary heard a different drummer and moved to the beat of what she heard, even though it put her out of step with those around her.

The last two years have brought rapid and unforeseen changes to our lives, our relationships, and our communities, and specific to our conversation today, to our church. Internalized rules and entrenched ways of doing things are collapsing under their own weight, giving way to the creation of something new. We have said it often during the last two years: we are different people from who we were before. We're older, perhaps weaker, perhaps wiser, always growing, shifting, adjusting, evolving. There are things about our experience that have brought us new gifts of awareness, a lightness in how we approach what is important in life. With the gifts have come the losses that are expressed in so many ways. They are real; we need not ignore them. Whatever the case, a new world is opening up before us. It is not a world that we might view as better or worse, but it's definitely different. In the midst of these huge changes, our internal GPS systems may call upon us to behave in ways that seem

strange to others, but our desire not to appear eccentric may stifle spiritually-directed impulses. Those impulses may seem strange, wonderful, scary, or life-giving. It's hard to say sometimes just how we feel about all of it, and our emotions can perhaps get the better of us. As poet Chelan Harkin reminds us, whatever emotions are evoked in us are considered priceless gems by the Spirit who dwells within.

Your Governing Board and your minister have been poring over all kinds of data during the last couple of years. It didn't start with the recent survey. It has included spreadsheets and tracking, budgets and property management, and countless hours of donated time to reflect, consider, evaluate and plan. As we bring our whole beings into this process, we need the energy of Mary and Martha. We need to dream of new days, and we need to understand how to accomplish the work of those dreams. We all have ideas about how the church can survive and thrive; we have visions of "precious ointments," some treasures of the past that we'd like to reach for, to remember, perhaps to relive.

Our past informs us, but it is not coming back. We are a people of non-traditional traditions, with our own sets of dogmas about how things should go, what we prefer, and what we expect to have happen. But Jerusalem is looming. All the good intentions in the world will not change the conditions we might be facing, but if we can be honest and vulnerable, if we can communicate fully and openly, if we can get into the flow of divine energy and let it carry us to the best possible outcome, then I think we can create the next iteration of CCC. It may not be what we had, and it may not be what we envisioned, but we are the creators of it. Let us open our hearts and minds today as we speak and create together.