

5th Sunday in Lent – John 12:1-8
April 3, 2022
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Grace, mercy and peace be to you, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have a friend that has been sending Christmas and Easter cards to our family for the last 15 or so years. I know on the surface that might not seem very unusual, since both my husband and I are both pastors, and those two holidays are kind of a big deal to us. The unusual part of this story is that these are not the typical, heart-warming cards filled with pictures of peaceful nativity scenes or cross adorned with lilies. No, these are the kind of “politically incorrect” cards filled with humor and jokes that are a little off key. I will never forget the card that she sent a few years ago that connects perfectly with our gospel lesson for today. The front of the card only had four words: “Judas. Worst friend. Ever.” Inside it simply said “Happy Easter,” and was signed by the couple.

I am thankful that I have a friend who understands the stress and extra demands that Christmas and Lent/Easter bring into our family’s life, and sends us these humorous cards to encourage us with a sign of their love and support. The reason that card came to mind as I was spending time studying this week’s gospel lesson, it that I feel like this humorous greeting card actually got it right. Judas was pretty much the worst friend ever, to Jesus.

In today’s text, we see two very different examples of discipleship portrayed in the characters of the story. On the one hand we have Mary and Martha – two women who demonstrate the ultimate model of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus – taking on the role of a servant leader as they put themselves last and the needs of others (and Jesus) first. Contrasting them is Judas – a man who tries to portray himself as one who cares for the poor and the needs of others,

however the author of the gospel makes it clear to the reader of the true motivations behind Judas' words about selling the perfume for money.

When I read texts like this, it sometimes baffles me to know that Judas was part of Jesus' inner circle during his ministry. The one who would betray Jesus and hand him over the authorities to be killed was one of his close associates and confidants. How could God let it happen that way? Wouldn't it have been easier – maybe not sting as much – if the betrayer had been a stranger or casual bystander, rather than one of the twelve?

As much as this “betrayal by friend” aspect of the salvation story gets me confused and mad with the way that event transpired – it also gives me hope. Hope, because I know that there have been plenty of times that I, too, have betrayed Jesus with my words and actions – or sometimes lack of action. I know that while I strive to be a faithful follower and servant of God, like Martha and Mary are portrayed, my first instinct is often a selfish desire to look out for my own needs. Perhaps this resonates with you too. Maybe you have had moments in your life when you feel more like a Judas, and less like a Mary/Martha type. Martin Luther said we are “*simul justes et peccator*” – which means we are simultaneously saint and sinner. We have been made righteous by the salvation of Jesus, but we are still sinful in our broken human lives here and now. In a sense we are both Judas and Mary – all rolled into one.

And therein lays the beauty of God's grace. Both the sisters and Judas were loved by Jesus. Judas was allowed to keep hanging out with the disciples, even though Jesus knew what was going to happen. Several chapters earlier in this gospel, Jesus refers to one of the twelve as a devil, indicating that he knew of the betrayal even then (John 6:70-71), and yet he let Judas stay. Quite frankly, there is a lot of Jesus' ministry that contradicts what I think would have been the natural course for God to take – which is exactly why God is God, and I am not. Isaiah

55:8 puts it well, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.”

The reminder that God’s plans are not the same as ours can be very useful when we hear a story like this, because perhaps there is a part of us that would agree with Judas. Wouldn’t it have served a better purpose to sell that costly perfume – which was the equivalent of about a year’s worth of the daily wage – and use the money for the poor? Isn’t that what Jesus was all about? If this was the only text a person heard regarding Jesus, it could portray him as unsympathetic or heartless, since it appears that Jesus is more concerned with his own desires, rather than the needs of the poor.

Fortunately for us, we know the rest of the story – and can understand how this extravagant act of Mary was being used by Jesus as a sign that his time was at hand, and not as a selfish act. To better understand this story, we have to recognize that there are many levels to Mary’s actions – starting with a simple devotion and love for Jesus, going deeper to a thankfulness for raising her brother Lazarus from the dead – and concluding with a prophetic action which announces that Jesus’ death had now begun. It was customary at that time to use spices and precious ointments to prepare a body for burial, which Jesus alludes to in his comments about Mary’s actions. We also might understand her action serve as a foreshadowing of what was to come, as biblical tradition includes many stories of the heads of kings being anointed with oil as a sign of their role. In this story, it is Jesus’ feet, not his head, which is anointed – pointing to the fact that he would be a very different kind of king – the kind of servant king who would willingly die in order to save God’s people from their sins. This anointing of Jesus by Mary marks the beginning of his death march to the cross, as the very next story in John’s gospel depicts Jesus entering Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna!” and palm branches, which we know will soon turn to shouts of “Crucify him!”

As Christians it can be easy for us to read the account of Jesus' passion and miss some of the connections to the Old Testament, since we often focus on Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and then move forward in the Bible. However, it is important for us to remember how this sacrificial death of Jesus was the pinnacle of God's salvation story, which began back in Genesis. In Jesus, God was doing a new thing – similar to the new thing that was occurring at the time for the people in the Old Testament reading for today from Isaiah 43. It was important for the people to be aware of the past and the ways in which God had acted in their lives – saving them from the hand of their enemies and rescuing them from slavery – but they couldn't remain stuck in the past. They had to pay attention to what God was doing right then – around them – right under their noses – as God was once again about to bring them out of oppression and restore their broken relationships.

This new thing took place in Isaiah's time, and in Mary, Martha and Judas' time, and is still happening now in this time. It is the new thing that God does in each of us, every day, as we live our lives as God's disciples in this world. It's a chance to wake up every morning, facing an uncertain day filled with events, temptations, successes and failures, knowing that we face that day as loved, forgiven, children of God.

We all have faced challenges in the last few years – some different than others – but no one has been unaffected by the ways that the pandemic has changed our workplaces, schools, churches, communities and everyday life. As we continue to make our way through this wilderness desert, I want to lift up the example of Mary in this story as a model for how God is calling us to act. We sometimes think that we have to wait to use the gifts that God has given us – as if it needs to be the perfect time before we can do what we believe God calls us to do. Mary didn't think that way. She could have saved that perfume for her own family's financial stability, or used little bits of it over time. However, instead of being cautious with

the extravagant gift that she had, she chose to go all in and follow in the example of Jesus. She took all that she had and used it for where she felt God calling her – anointing Jesus for what he was being called to do, as he prepared to go all in and begin his journey toward the cross.

Whether we find ourselves today feeling more like a Judas than a Mary, we can trust and hope in the good news that God does not change. We see the evidence of that from the past accounts of God’s lavish grace being poured out, both in Scripture and our own lives. Knowing the story of God’s love, faithfulness and salvation – in spite of our own failings and Judas moments – gives us the ability to face both the present and the future – not with fear – but with expectation and eagerness for the new thing that God will be doing next. Thanks be to God for this promise in our lives. Amen.

Drawn close to the heart of God, we offer these prayers for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

Do a new thing in the church. Free us from paradigms that no longer serve the gospel and bring forward leaders who imagine fresh ways of doing ministry. Give us courage in the face of change. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Do a new thing for creation. Reverse the trajectory of climate change and environmental catastrophe. Revive habitats already impaired by human disregard. Amplify the voices of climate scientists and researchers working to chart a new course. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Do a new thing in our world. Break barriers that prevent political enemies from working together for the well-being of all. Make a way for peace and collaboration among the nations. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Do a new thing for those who suffer. Reveal a path for any who are unemployed or underemployed, for those experiencing homelessness, and for all who struggle with money. Comfort those who grieve and restore those who are sick. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Do a new thing within us. Direct us into encounters that broaden our understanding of the human experience. Amplify voices that are ignored or devalued. Deliver us especially from the scourge of racism. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Do a new thing in our death. Fill us with the knowledge of Christ and the power of his resurrection as we give thanks for all the saints who have attained the prize of their heavenly call. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Accept the prayers we bring, O God, on behalf of a world in need, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

You are children of God,
anointed with the oil of gladness
and strengthened for the journey.
Almighty God,
motherly, majestic, and mighty,
✠ bless you this day and always.
Amen.