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Lent 5, Yr. C
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John 12: 1 – 8
Philippians 3: 4b- 14

Wilderness Wanderings: “Living in the Now”

Joke: God and the devil were having a conversation. The devil says, “I bet I can make a better human being than you.” And God says, “You think so? Okay, meet me here tomorrow morning at 8 a.m.”

So they meet and the devil bends down to grab a handful of dirt and God says, “O no you don’t! Get your *own* dirt.”

Jesus and the disciples are enjoying a respite from the press of the crowds and the dust of the endless roads in the home of dear friends, Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. When Jesus is weary, they offer him their home and hospitality. On this occasion they give a dinner in his honor.

The story tells us Martha served. We know Martha and her sister Mary in another story from the gospel of Luke. Do you remember that story?¹

Tell me what was Martha’s complaint? Yes, Jesus is in their home for a visit and Mary has chosen to sit at his feet to listen to him, but Martha is distracted with her many tasks and complains to Jesus saying, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.”

And Jesus answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried over many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

On the day of my son and daughter-in-law’s wedding, I’ll never forget running around

just before the service trying to figure out how to make a video camera work—rummaging through the furnace room looking for an extension cord- Grabbing up a big orange cord I hustled back into the sanctuary, weaving my way through guests at the door only to meet long time friends I seldom ever see standing there. They had come to share in our joy—and I was distracted. Unable to be fully present. That’s when it hit me—it’s not all about the details. I very nearly missed out on the meaning inherent in this special moment!

Back to the dinner party. At this dinner for Jesus, Luke reminds us that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and is sitting at the table with the Lord. That information speaks volumes! Who is Jesus to this household? Who would he be for you? When we speak of Savior or Teacher or Healer or the presence of God incarnate do we know this truth with the same certitude as this man and his sisters?

As we noted, Martha is busy with her many tasks of serving but Mary takes a jar of very expensive perfume---a small fortune all by itself, and lavishly pours it on Jesus’ feet and then wipes his feet with her hair. John adds this detail saying: “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Don’t you feel like you are there?

What an entrancing, fragrant moment. A moment that requires us to be still and permit our senses to take in the full experience.

It also requires us to witness an outpouring of love for Jesus expressed in Mary’s tender act of massaging his weary feet with the fragrant oil. An oil Jesus tells us that Mary has reserved for his anointing on the event of his death. (Pause)

Yesterday I went over to Long’s drugs in the Save Mart shopping center at Shaw and Armstrong to buy some sundries before heading out of town tomorrow. I will be going to Nashville to accompany ministerial candidates to a Bishops’ Residency Conference.

¹ Luke 10: 38 - 42

I anxiously had my list of “must-do’s” in mind—one of which was preparing for this morning. I was rummaging through my purse looking for my shopping list when I found a crumpled note given to me earlier in the week by Tina Molina, the proprietor of the Bierock Shop in the same center. The note was a request for prayer—her landlord has increased the rent a couple of hundred dollars every six months for over a year, and as a consequence, she is behind in her rent and desperately struggling to make ends meet.

Tina is a baker. Baking is her passion. She uses recipes her Italian grandmother used and she has perfected her own. She makes fabulous Italian cookies, shortbread, puff pastries, delectable brownies—you name it.: all scrumptious and not the usual bakery fare even for small shops. The quality is beyond measure. And so is the company; which reminds me of Tina’s motto, “Cookies keep us company.”

And not only the cookies. Tina’s shop is a gathering place for folks who appreciate the fact that Tina knows their names, is kind, gracious and generous. The atmosphere is bubbly and welcoming and a respite from the usual franchise atmosphere of most other shops.

For 14 years, since she was emancipated at the age 16 Tina has poured her life into her bakery business. But she has been unable to secure it financially in spite of the popularity or quality of her product because of a lack of business capital.

She can’t secure a small business loan because she doesn’t own any property. If she could break into the housing market she would qualify.

She has slept in her shop for months on end in years past; worked 16 hour days; or worked two jobs only to keep one step ahead of the bill collectors and the landlord. Now she is facing her own Good Friday. The death of her dream. The end. A letter written by a lawyer

friend to the landlord requesting a stabilization in rent has gone unanswered. She is selling off her equipment and will be forced to close up shop at the end of this month. Psychologically, she has hit rock bottom.

I first met Tina four years ago when Ian and Tara were getting married. Sue DeFranco told me about her wonderful cookies when she had her business over in the Barnyard shopping center here on Pollasky.

I decided her special cookies would make a perfect desert at the end of the Rehearsal Dinner. She wrapped them beautifully and the occasion they were for added to her pleasure.

I have so loved going into Tina’s shop to buy up a dozen cookies for the staff or colleagues or for a meeting out of town, or a family holiday gathering, made all the more significant by the conversation that went with the purchase.

I found out Tina’s Bierock shop has become a gathering place for Clovis East High School students. She counsels them in their dilemmas and answers their questions when they leave them on her My Space web page, pointing them to scripture passages and encouraging them. Tina gives herself away with every purchase made. But now there is no one to give to Tina. And she is truly a lost soul.

No one will notice when the doors are finally closed except those of us who understand and appreciate the treasure she has provided us: the community she created, the gift of self that she so willingly gave—not to mention the wonderful cookies! A rare fragrant experience of being fully present in the moment in the midst of the hum drum, distracted, must-do business of every day! (Pause)

Now let’s go back to Bethany and the dinner table. Judas Iscariot, the treasurer of the group is quick to condemn Mary’s extravagance with the perfume as a huge waste of money

which could have been sold and given to the poor. On the surface it would certainly seem so.

But as Kate, our music director, said so well when we were discussing this passage in worship planning, “Judas knows the cost of every thing and the value of nothing.” Our culture, our bottom-line oriented society knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

This is the trade-off we’ve made as a modern society in centering our lives so completely around money. As a consequence, our humanity and our environment, our longing for community, and our ability to give ourselves for others; and the time it takes to tend and nurture relationships, are compromised if not rubbed out. And we call this progress!

We live in a world where Judas’ value out weights Mary’s value, don’t we? We live in a world where we don’t believe in our ability to return life to the dead at heart.

Jesus’ response to Judas reminds us that Mary is aware that Jesus is going to his death. These moments with him are a mixture of gratitude for the truly abundant life he brings, the friendship they have all enjoyed together, and the knowledge that he will soon be taken from them.

Mary isn’t about to let the significance of this moment pass. She will honor it; memorialize it as best she can with an act of love. After all, the return of her brother to life is far more priceless than the jar of perfume just as is the presence of the One who is the resurrection and the life, Jesus.

You’ve all seen those Master Card commercials that say, “the cost of a (trip, performance, dinner etc. -- you fill in the blanks)...” followed by a priceless moment spent with a loved one. The message of the ad tugs at our heart strings and leads us right in to the notion we can buy these priceless moments by purchasing the things that will permit them to happen. As if we could buy time, buy the ingredients of a relational moment.

Jesus life, ministry and his death reveal the truth. What it takes to purchase a priceless moment is the maturity of self-giving love. Giving oneself away, giving our time, giving our service, giving our attention, and yes, giving our dollars –but not as an excuse for not giving of ourselves to others. Because in giving we receive beyond measure. This is what Mary knows and Judas is ignorant of. This is what Tina knows and the bakery department in a large supermarket can’t provide regardless of who their interior designer or advertising agent is.

Living in the now requires an awareness and a faithful response to God’s active grace in the present.

Your Lenten Discipline for this week is to meditate on Jesus’ journey to the cross and the question:

What am I willing to give in order to receive truly abundant life?