

Lent 5, Yr C, 032110
All Saints Episcopal Church

We are nearing the end of Lent - this is the last Sunday before Holy Week begins with the Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday - and today we turn our attention to the story of a dinner party in the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany. Dinner is at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, but it is not just a nice little story somewhere in the middle of John's gospel. It's set at the turning point of that Gospel, literally and figuratively.

Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem instead of remaining a man 'of the people' - popular with the people in small villages and the countryside, but out of the reach of the religious authorities and the Roman Empire. His raising of Lazarus from the dead, which happened just a short time before the dinner party, has set into motion the wheels of the machinery that will kill Jesus in just a few more days. The high priest and the Pharisees hear the claims from eyewitnesses that Jesus has really crossed the line this time - not just curing a leper or driving out a demon but bringing back to life a man who had been in the tomb for four long days.

When the word spread that Jesus had brought his friend Lazarus back from the dead - the action was seen as a promise of things to come from this man - and the religious leaders panicked. They said, "We've got to put a stop to this, or people will believe in him, and that will aggravate the Romans; then they'll come in and destroy our holy place and our nation - we'll have to raise the terror alert to orange at least, maybe even red." - "So," the text says, "from that day on they planned to put him to death."

Right in the midst of all of this intrigue, Jesus' friends decided to throw a dinner party. And why not? After all, Lazarus wasn't just sort of dead or figuratively dead, like the Prodigal Son last week - "This son of mine was dead, and come back to life" - Lazarus was dead dead. Dead long enough to raise a stink. And Jesus had called Lazarus out of that tomb, despite the fact that the consequences of Jesus' actions might result in his own death.

Lazarus and his sisters want to gather some other friends and honor Jesus - to thank him - and to celebrate the new life of their brother. But the conversation must have been tense - Jesus surely knows by now that he is a marked man - and things get more and more tense throughout the evening. They - like we - begin to pick at others, to criticize, to worry - and things begin to get even worse.

But Mary does not seem to be affected by the tension in the house. In fact, Mary seems to loosen up instead of getting tenser. She loses some of the inhibition that women were expected to have and does some things that women were not supposed to do. First, she literally lets her hair down, something women only did for their husbands. Then she pours incredibly expensive ointment on Jesus' feet - also not done. Maybe she could have anointed his head - that was done for kings - but not his feet. Then, she touches his feet - definitely not something a single woman should do with a single man. And finally, she wipes his feet off with her hair. Bizarre behavior. No inhibitions. Very extravagant. Just as Jesus began his ministry with an extravagance of excellent wine at a wedding feast, so his ministry begins its conclusion with an extravagance of expensive ointment and an even more extravagant display of love and caring.

But just then, Judas jumps in with a rebuke for Mary: "Why are you using such expensive ointment? This could have been sold for the equivalent of a year's wages and used to care for the poor!" And we could almost agree with him, except that gospel-writer John warns us with a little aside: You know that Judas doesn't really care about the poor. He steals from the disciples' discretionary fund. His heart is not in the right place. Watch out for him.

Perhaps the only thing worse than not caring about the poor is pretending to care about them. Here, on the edge of his act of betrayal, Judas pretends to know what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. But it's Mary, not Judas the self-righteous voice of criticism, who teaches us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. She recognizes who Jesus is. Just as importantly, she recognizes who she is as his follower: one who serves, one who anoints, one who gives extravagantly without counting the cost...one whose response to Jesus is an act of love.

Jesus answers Judas' rebuke by saying that we always have the poor with us. It sounds like a crass thing to say. Some people even use that as an excuse to not do anything: the poor will always be here, so why should we use up so much time with them if they won't ever 'go away?'

But I would suggest that Jesus didn't mean it that way at all. I think he meant that the poor would always need our help, and that he himself has shown us what to do and how to be with the poor. Why else would he have told the parable of the Good Samaritan or the story of the widow's mite? Why tell healing stories? They tell

about his purpose, of course, but they also show us our purpose. Jesus says, Sure, go on and anoint me. But you'll always have the poor with you. So remember, that's why I came in the first place, and that's why I've chosen you: for the poor, the downtrodden, the cast out, the sick, the prisoner, the neighbor. I've chosen you to do God's work, to love God's love, to do God's justice, to do this in remembrance of me.

So now it is up to us.

In John's gospel, Jesus' feet are symbols of his actions, his mission in the world; and when Mary anoints those feet, she identifies and blesses Jesus' intentional action, blesses what God is doing in the world - that is, God's mission. What would it look like if we did the same as Mary? Instead of asking God always to bless our activity, what if we take the time to look at the world around us - in our communities, in our cities, and on our streets - and look for ways in which God is acting there? And when we see God in action, what if we look for ways to support and bless God's work? If we believe that God is at work in the world -- if we want to anoint Jesus' feet, his action out there -- then we need to be looking for evidence of Jesus' work in the world; we need to see the world and people's work in it through the lens of Jesus' ministry, in the context of salvation history, the story of God's creating the world and drawing it to God's self.

We are on our way to Jerusalem with Jesus. Next week we will once again enter into scripture's stories of God's extravagant loving and redeeming of the world. As we take part in this journey, why not also enter into the stories of our neighbors and their experience of God's love and redemption. We might see something that will change our lives. If we look for and bless what Jesus is doing in the world, we will surely see the world healing, growing and changing. Thanks be to God!