

Year C Lent 5 Perfection and Brokenness Together John 12 verses 1 to 8

As often happens, we have a story in Scripture that is, perhaps, very interesting but, seemingly far removed from our lives today. This, however, is far from the case. John writes this story long after Jesus has died and risen. John writes to a Church similar to ours in many ways. We are not persecuted as they were for being followers of this crucified Christ but, like them, we are small, loyal, sometimes looked at in confusion or curiosity or even disdain for our beliefs and our practice of gathering each week. John paints a word picture for the Church today – a picture filled with intrigue and exotic perfume. What we see and experience in today's story is a slice of life in the kingdom that Jesus brought with him when he, God of all things, became flesh and dwelt among us. It is a slice of life that we experience every single day. We have life in the kingdom but, at the same time, we are surrounded by the brokenness of the world. John writes to send us a clear message about how we are to deal with that conundrum of perfection and brokenness coexisting.

How do we know that John is showing us the perfect life in God's kingdom? Well, Jesus is there sharing a meal with friends. The idea of being gathered from the ends of the earth to feast in God's kingdom with God is something that continuously pops up throughout all of Scripture. And Lazarus is eating with them – Lazarus, who was brought back to life by the One with the power over life and death, is sitting at the table and John makes sure we take note of that. We are meant to connect this moment with the promise of God who has told us he will destroy death and bring perfection. Through Isaiah, God said:

"On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare  
a feast of rich food for all peoples,

a banquet of aged wine--  
the best of meats and the finest of wines.  
On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.  
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;  
he will remove the disgrace of his people  
from all the earth." (Isaiah 25:6-8)

This promised feast in God's kingdom is the feast we enjoy each time we gather. It is the drawing together of peoples of all nations, around the world and even across time – different people, different time zones, continuously celebrating. Jesus tells us time and again, in his parables and directly – there will be a Great Banquet and we are invited. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells us that his body and his blood are real food and real drink – whoever eats and drinks will dwell in him and he in us (John 6:56). Jesus is present with us as we are present with him. John reminds *us* of this when Jesus reminds his disciples today of his approaching death. It is through his death and resurrection that this life with him is possible because, in the mystery of our baptisms, we share in his death and in his new life with God in God's kingdom. Each time we break bread together, it is not a dramatic re-enactment of the feast in God's perfect kingdom, we are in the presence of God, in God's kingdom, eating at God's table.

But this new life that we share, this feast that we eat in God's perfect kingdom, is lived amid the ongoing brokenness of the world. New life in Christ and feasting in God's kingdom are not yet a reality for everyone. It was not yet a reality then for Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and the disciples eating in Jesus' presence and it is not yet a reality for us, the Church. Perfection and brokenness butt up against one another.

We see this coexistence of perfection and brokenness, too, in the discipleship we witness. Martha served. Two small words easily rushed over and overlooked for their importance. Martha serves them their meal – the model of hospitality and graciousness, of giving to others from her own abundance, sharing what is hers in an act motivated by love. John emphasizes the importance of this model of servitude. Jesus tells his disciples that the master is not greater than the servant – they must serve one another as he has served them. Then he connects this serving of others with love, giving them a new commandment: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

The serving born from love that Jesus commands of his disciples are brought together at this meal today by Mary. Mary lavishes love on Jesus by perfuming his feet and wiping them with her hair. It is an act of extravagant abundance and intimate love. Kneeling on the floor before Jesus, she washes his feet and wipes them – an act that prefigures the foot washing we will witness at the very next meal John describes for us. This time, we will see Jesus on his knees on the floor, washing and wiping the feet of his disciples. It is an act to show us that servanthood is to be motivated by abundant love and compassion. Jesus follows this act with words that spell it out: serve one another as I have served you. Love

one another as I have love you. It is a love that may make others uncomfortable. Peter cringes with the thought that his master will wash his feet. It is a love that produces generosity that may make others uncomfortable. Judas cringes with the lavishness of the love he is witnessing.

Judas shows us how the brokenness of the world can corrupt discipleship. He looks, to the outside observer, to be a loyal, trusted follower of Jesus. He is part of the small group closest to Jesus. He has responsibility for the group's money and spent – at least some of it – on the poor. We hear him speak a logical complaint – this extravagant amount of money used to buy the perfume should have been spent on the poor. This is what Jesus teaches, isn't it?

John is taking the opportunity to warn us that outside actions do not necessarily reflect inside righteousness. The self-righteous words of Judas are covering the dark heart of a traitorous thief. We saw this very same thing, in a different way, last week in the story of the Prodigal Son. The older son who seems to do everything right – loyal, obedient, hard-working, rule-following – is shown to be in desperate need of God's grace just as much as the younger sinful son. He insults his father by self-righteously taking a stand against his father's loving embrace of a sinner. He wants to put limits, based on rules and doctrine, on his father's love and compassion which was – no coincidence – demonstrated through a great banquet.

Judas is shown to be corrupted by the brokenness of the world, interested in serving only himself and in getting what he wants. Our church, now and across time, is and has been full of its share of this type. The ones who abuse their possession of power to inflict harm on others. The ones who keep money that should be given to the poor. The ones who, like the older son, judge and condemn

and exclude... bringing us yet again to the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians."

Jesus' answer to Judas is the Church's answer – our answer – to the distressing reality that God's kingdom still resides alongside the crime, the hate, the oppression, the sickness, of the world's kingdoms. "You always have the poor with you," Jesus says, "but you do not always have me." It sounds like Jesus is saying to honour him in lavish acts of devotion while ignoring the needs of the poor at that moment. This does not fit with what John tells us here – even this ragtag little group of disciples keeps a common purse from which they give to the poor. Nor does it fit with what we know of Jesus in the rest of the Gospel. Jesus spends his short-lived mission recognizing and responding to the physical needs around him – providing abundantly and healing compassionately. He challenges the oppressive religious and political systems that create the underclass and the outcast of society while padding the pockets of the powerful. This, in fact, gets him killed.

The Greek word that we hear translated as "You always have the poor with you" is the same word which translates into the command: "Have the poor with you always." It is an echo of God's command in Deuteronomy: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land' (Deut.15:11)." Have the poor always. You will not always have me. Jesus' death is looming large in his thoughts. He speaks as if Mary is anointing him at his death. Anointing in Jerusalem would happen at the crowning of a king and at the burial of a corpse. For Jesus, it is both. Mary is anointing the king who will soon ride into Jerusalem on a donkey to

the praise of an adoring crowd – a king who will unexpectedly win victory in his death.

While Jesus commands his disciples to always care for the poor, he does not condemn Mary's extravagance. He accepts her gift of love. Matt Skinner writes, "This passage gives permission, so to speak, to honor Jesus in extravagant ways, perhaps even by giving a massive donation to the poor. It warns against mistaking discipline for discipleship. It embraces affection as part of a devotion to Jesus that is nothing less than the costly, precious gift of one's whole self—down to every last strand of hair" (workingpreacher.org, Matt Skinner).

Jesus tells us to live now in the joy of his presence, lavishing him with abundant love, and feasting in his kingdom while at the same time serving him through serving others, loving him through loving others.

Surrounded by brokenness, we must live the kingdom life anyway. In doing so, we are his light, his hope, his peace, and his love in the world. We are the sign of the kingdom for others – telling them God's kingdom is here. We are the foretaste of God's kingdom for others – telling them the perfection of the kingdom is coming. We are the instrument of God's kingdom – collaborating with God to reveal more and more of the kingdom until it is complete on earth as in heaven.

Like Paul, let us strain forward to what lies ahead, pressing onward toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.