



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 13, 2016
THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Leaning into the Heart of the Holy: Now
Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

The way in which we relate to a lot of things in life depends on perspective, doesn't it? For instance, many of you will remember Lionel Richie's hit song "Easy" from the last century. That sound's ancient, doesn't it? It was only twenty-four years ago, which to some of you is ancient! Anyway, in 1992, Lionel Richie recorded a song in which he announced to his girlfriend that he's breaking up with her because he wants to be free. He doesn't want any chains on him. He wants to know that the things he does are right. I'm guessing this girl was quite controlling! Obviously they were not a good match and Richie explains it all by singing, "I'm easy, I'm easy like Sunday morning."¹ Now, as a teenager, I dated one or two girls who could be rather controlling, so I understand that part of the song. However, as a minister, Sunday mornings are never what I would call "easy." I know that for you, Sunday is one day, maybe the only day, you can sleep a bit later, have a second cup of coffee, read the paper, even roll over and sleep in if you want to. I get that, but the truth is that Sunday mornings are not easy for most church-going folks, especially if children are involved. Getting everyone out of bed, fed, dressed, and to church on time can be exhausting. And if you are someone who still likes to have a full dinner after church, Sunday morning is anything but easy!

Sunday mornings may not be so easy, but Sunday afternoons are. Sunday afternoons have a different feel. After a nice lunch and, for some folks, a nap, the afternoons are more relaxed. From my perspective, the week ends on Sunday, so I feel like I have completed something and can take a breath before the next week begins. I understand that "I'm easy, I'm easy like Sunday afternoon" doesn't quite cut it musically, but those are the lyrics I would use!

Today's Gospel lesson is, for me, a Sunday afternoon scene. Listen to what John tells us:

¹Lionel Richie, "Easy," *Back To Front*, (1992) © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." John 12:1-8

It is a Sunday, six days before the Passover. It is not the Sabbath for this group of Jews, so there were no synagogue services to attend. Jesus and his disciples have been invited to a dinner given by Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. It is a time to relax and enjoy their friendship. As usual, Martha has been busy preparing the meal. Disciples are scattered in and around the house. Lazarus, newly resurrected, is present, and, as was the custom, Jesus was reclining at the table, enjoying the meal and the company, a rare moment of relaxation for the Messiah on the last leg of his journey to Jerusalem.

In the custom of hospitality, Mary washes and anoints Jesus' feet, but chooses nard, an exotic and expensive perfume, one generally reserved for anointing bodies for burial. It is an act of gratitude and love. Not too many days before, her brother Lazarus was himself buried in a tomb and Jesus raised him to life. As MaryAnn McKibben Dana reminds us, over the four days that Lazarus' body was in the tomb, his body had begun to decompose. We know that when Jesus was resurrected, he carried the marks of the nails and spear with him. Likely Lazarus bore some of the vestiges of death and perhaps even the smell of death lingered on him, so the heady perfume might have been welcomed.²

Imagine for a moment that you are sitting in that room. The appetizing smells of dinner rise from the table, but the aromatic nard brings tears to your eyes from poignant memories stirred by the funereal perfume. You think of

²MaryAnn McKibben Dana, "Living the Word: March 13, Fifth Sunday in Lent," *The Christian Century* (March 2, 2016): 18.

loved ones who have died and of precious memories made with them. The room becomes quiet. Jesus smiles at Mary, whose love is as strong as the perfume she now wears in her hair. Mary forces a smile through tears that understand why she has anointed Jesus in this way. The others think of home and family left behind years ago. They remember and wonder. It is a holy moment . . . until . . . shattering the silence and the mood, Judas asks his crass question about selling the perfume to benefit the poor.

Now, honestly, you might expect Jesus to ask a question like that. After all, he was the one who told others that it was more difficult for a rich person to enter heaven than for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle (Luke 18:25). He was the one who told a wealthy young man that in order to inherit eternal life he not only needed to keep the commandments but also to sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow him—not because you can buy your way into heaven but because wherever we invest our treasure is where we will find our heart (Mark 10:21). Therefore, Jesus implied, if our heart is in the bank with our money, we need to empty the vault and fill it with compassion.

Apparently Jesus had no problem with Mary's use of the expensive perfume on his feet. He was enjoying the moment. You might expect Judas to prop his feet on the bench and ask Mary for a foot massage as well. John tells us Judas was skimming off the Apostle's fund, perhaps using the money to enjoy the finer things of life. It was a moment—a good moment—an easy afternoon—until Judas destroyed it.

Out of all the people at that dinner party, the only one not enjoying himself is Judas. The only one not in sync with their mission is Judas. The only one not completely devoted to Jesus is Judas. The only one not at peace in the moment is Judas. Everyone else is relishing the moment, taking stock of God's goodness, enjoying one another's company, celebrating God's wonder. Everyone but Judas is leaning into the heart of the Holy.

One way to lean into the heart of the Holy is to be fully present in the moment. Last week several of our Lenten devotions illustrated this truth. Jessica Williams shared with us the experience of a conversation with a friend in a noisy restaurant when all other distractions were pushed away. She reminded us how God is like a dance partner asking us to lean in and trust his lead as we dance through life. Deborah shared with you the way in which our granddaughter Savannah leans into her dad's phone to give us a kiss because she sees us in the tiny screen. It matters not that we are thousands

of miles away and looking at one another through smart phones. She sees us and remembers the kisses we shared when she was here last October.

This very common snapshot from a day in the life of Jesus reminds us of what we can often miss if we do not pay attention to what is around us and before us. Most of the time when reading this story, we think only of Judas' impending betrayal. We miss Martha wiping her hands on her apron and smiling with delight as she watches everyone enjoy her meal. We miss the tears that mingle with the nard as Mary washes Jesus' feet, knowing that soon he will be placed in a tomb as was her brother. We miss the other disciples as they chat and joke, and fall silent thinking about the folks back home. We miss Lazarus—fully alive once again and dining with his friends! We can miss so much when we fail to lean into what God is doing in the world around us.

However, when we open our eyes and ears, when we taste and smell and touch the goodness inherent in the world, we open our hearts more fully to God. I believe that everyone in that house in Bethany sensed God's presence in some way unique to them—everyone but Judas. His heart was where his treasure was. He could not see the love and gratitude in Mary's touch. He could not taste the generosity in Martha's food. He could not hear the peace in Jesus' relaxed breathing. He could not smell the holiness of Jesus' impending death in the perfume. It is a shame that Judas missed out on so much because God was present and accounted for all over the place.

It is important that we take time to notice what is going on around us because we never know what God might be up to. As David Lose, president of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, reminds us, God is always doing the unexpected. Noting that throughout most of the Bible, it is men who anoint other men, but here it is Mary who anoints Jesus, he reflects:

[This] reminds me that God is often up to unexpected things with, for, and through unexpected people. People expected the messiah to look like King David; what they got instead was a former carpenter and itinerant preacher. The crowds who welcome Jesus a few verses after these expected Jesus to throw out the Romans; instead he is crucified by them. Even his followers expect his crucifixion to be the end of the story; it turns out to be just the beginning.

And of course this isn't the half of it. Sarah wasn't expected to have children, let alone found a dynasty. Moses wasn't expected

to lead the Israelites to freedom. Miriam wasn't expected to be the prophetess of Israel teaching her people to sing of God's victory over the Egyptians. The ruddy-faced shepherd boy David wasn't supposed to be king. And on and on and on.

God regularly loves to do the unexpected with, for, and through unexpected people. And the culmination of Lent and celebration of Easter are the highlight of the work and activity of this unexpected God, as death is assumed to have the last word, until Jesus is raised from the dead.³

We worship the God of the unexpected. If we do not want to miss all that God is doing, we had better pay attention to everything that is going on around us.

I enjoy watching good magicians because they remind me of all of the wonder that exists in our ordinary, understandable world. We know that there is really no such thing as magic; rather, the entertainers we call magicians are actually illusionists. They trick us and wow us by creating illusions so that we think they are doing magic.

Two of the greatest illusionists ever are Penn Jillette and his silent partner Teller. Penn and Teller currently have a show where they challenge other illusionists to perform for them to see if they can trick the master magicians. Every once in a while someone will pull one over on this dynamic duo so that they cannot see how the trick is done. Most often, however, they know the trick or can figure it out because they are familiar with the tools of the trade. They know what to look for, where to watch, how to focus their attention rather than being diverted to something else that is inconsequential.

So it is with our faith. The more we pay attention to God in the world, the more often we will sense God at work in the world. All of us can sense God in a beautiful sunset, a pretty daisy, and the singing of a bird. But did you taste the goodness of God in your coffee this morning? Think about the person who cultivated the trees, harvested the beans, roasted them, and shipped them. So many people are a part of the chain that brought that coffee to you, and each one is a child of God.

³David Lose, "Dear Partner: The Unexpected God," . . . *In the Meantime*, March 8, 2016; available online at: <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/03/lent-5-c-the-unexpected-god/>.

Did you notice the face of God in the person who handed you an order of worship today? Did you hear the voice of God in the singing of our choir? Do you feel the embrace of God in the family of faith around you? Did you sense the grief of God when you watched the morning news? Where else have you seen or heard or tasted or smelled or felt the presence of God?

Beth Nielsen Chapman, a singer-songwriter who is as alive to the world as anyone I know, sings a song titled “God Is In” which captures the spirit of this awareness of God in the world in a meaningful and often humorous way:

God is in the child's eye, see them wide, wondrous wise.
God is in the rain and snow, and each snowflake this we know.
God is in the trees and air, the rocks, the birds, the bees, the bears.
God is in the clouds above, God is in each act of love.
God is in the oceans deep, some say God goes there to sleep.
God is in the mountains high whistling a lullaby.
God is in the darkest wood, God is in your neighborhood.
God is in a place that's near . . . sometimes it's just not so clear.

. . . .

God is in the Ozone layer—holier and holier.
If not inside the atom bomb—at least the atom bomber's Mom.
God is Darfur, Bagdad, Jerusalem, Serbia, Morovia, Liberia,
Sagovia, Yugoslavia, Montana, Oklahoma.
God is so inspired by those who fly and those who try.
God is insatiable—sing and dance way past full.
God is in you and me, someday God will help us see
God's love with love so live,
Live and love and that's enough . . . God Is In!⁴

God is also in our homes and businesses, in our schools and shops, in our cars and planes and trains. God is everywhere, we just have to look and listen and smell and taste and feel. God was in that house in Bethany where almost everyone enjoyed a feast of food and fellowship, everyone but Judas. It's a matter of perspective. Don't be Judas and miss out on the most amazing things happening in life. Lean into the heart of the Holy—now!

⁴Billy Jonas, Laura Mahr, Chris Chandler, Beth Nielsen Chapman, and Annie Roboff, “God Is In (Goddess In),” *Prism: The Human Family Songbook*, © BNC Records, 2007.

March 13, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In this moment of worship, O Lord our God, quiet our frantic lives and open our hearts to recognize the new thing that you are doing among and within us. Too often we travel through our lives too burdened by the past or worried about the future to see the blessings that are springing forth and the paths that you are opening right in front of us. The busy tasks of our days often distract us and turn our attention away from those things with eternal significance. In this season of Lent, O Lord, as we travel with Christ along his wilderness journey, teach us, once again, to be still and know that you are God. Focus our attention on our need for relationship with you and with one another. Heal our hurts and calm our souls so that as we become restored in you, we might also be challenged and inspired to reach out in your name to a hurting world.

O Lord, as we look at our world, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the need that we see. So many of our own number are sick. So many around the world are hungry or homeless or suffer persecution and violence. So many more need the hope and light that you can bring to their lives. We pray for your guidance and healing and mercy. Teach us to be diligent in working to meet the needs of others, to be constant in our prayers, and to be faithful in sharing the light of your hope and peace.

In this season when we focus on reflection and renewal, we are grateful, O God, for new beginnings and second chances. Even as we seek to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of your love for us through the gift of Jesus Christ, help us to see that you are not a god created in our human image, but the Creator who seeks to transform our lives and mold us in your image. Teach us to be merciful to one another as you have shown us mercy. Help us to love one another as you have shown us how to love. And remind us, Gracious God, even in the face of the darkness and fear which seem to reign, that your love is stronger than any wrong, and your grace is greater than all our sin. In the name of the One whose life, death and resurrection bring us abundant life for today and hope for all our days to come, we pray. Amen.

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