

Sermon for March 13, 2016
"A One Scene Play That Represents Life"

John 12:1-8

John presents the anointing of Jesus like a well written play. The characters involved are ones we are familiar with. We know their tendencies and personalities and their meaning from previous encounters in John's Gospel. The place is a house in Bethany, which John points out is the home town of Lazarus. You remember Lazarus: he is the one whom Jesus raised from the dead and John reminds us of that fact. In this drama Lazarus represents the resurrection from the dead.

Mary and Martha are also there. We know them from that famous story of Jesus eating at their house. Remember Martha was slaving feverishly in the kitchen to prepare a fitting dinner for the good teacher. At the same time Mary sat at Jesus feet listening to him speak, hearing and absorbing his teachings. We know their personalities well, they are people we can all relate to.

Then of course there is Judas. John reminds us that Judas is the one who later betrays Jesus. He also tells us that Judas has been pilfering from the treasury. So Judas is not merely a back stabber, he is also an embezzler. Judas represents the evil in all humans that Jesus is opposed to.

Finally there is Jesus. We all know him. He is on his way to Jerusalem and has stopped for a rest during his journey. He has been trying to make his followers understand why he is going to Jerusalem. But the more he tries, the more they resist God's plan for their salvation. The disciples are more like us than we like to admit sometimes.

The stage is set, and the curtains open on this one scene play. As the action begins they are about to eat supper. Lazarus is seated at the table. It doesn't say where, but I imagine him next to Jesus backstage. Mind you, Lazarus doesn't say anything in this play, but his presence is a constant reminder of the resurrection. So there sits Lazarus, Mr. "Resurrected From the Dead" himself, next to Jesus the source of resurrection. On the other side of the table I imagine Judas. And Martha, what would you expect, she is serving the dinner. And true to form Mary is at Jesus feet. The same place we saw her before. Like a child waiting to be told another story, she sits there attentive.

Then the action begins. Mary pulls a bottle of ointment out of her purse. She begins pouring it on Jesus' feet. Then she loosens her hair and she begins to wipe it into Jesus feet. Mary, the one who always listened to every word Jesus said, has understood. He is going to die. The teacher is going to Jerusalem to die so that everyone could know the kind of new life he had given her brother

Lazarus. So she symbolically anoints his body for burial. When words failed her, actions speak clearly. By anointing him for burial she was shouting from the mountaintops, "Jesus I know you must die." By the tenderness with which she did it she was saying, "I am sorry you will suffer but I understand why you must." The smell of the perfume filled the room and all attention was focused on Mary as she lovingly anointed Jesus feet.

Then Judas bolts from his chair, "Stop her!" And everyone in the room looks away from Mary to Judas. Judas says, "That perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor." Jesus knew Judas didn't care about the poor. So he told him, "Leave her alone. She can save the rest for my burial. Judas, you can help the poor any day, but I will die soon and you will not be able to help me."

We don't need the narrator to come out and tell us that Jesus did die for the sins of the world. That his death brought hope and new life to all. And that he rose again and Mary was there while Judas wasn't. We know all that. And we recall it as the curtain closes.

Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem in a manner of speaking. In this play he was on his way to Jerusalem so that he could bring salvation and new life to those who need it. Jesus is still in this world trying to do the same. He is still accomplishing his calling to liberate the oppressed, free the sinners, and bring comfort to the distraught and suffering.

And this little scene is played out every day. Along the way some recognizes Jesus at work and they add their "amen" to Jesus' grace. Like Mary, some add their loving support for what Jesus is doing. Some, like Lazarus, are sitting quietly by as living examples of Jesus' life giving power. But then some, like Judas, protest. They try to confuse the issues and merely pretend to be merciful. Like Judas they voice an opinion contrary to Jesus' work.

And I ask myself, "Where am I in this little play?" Am I supporting Jesus' work or am I opposing it? Have you accepted Christ's death as a sacrifice for your liberation? Some who were sitting with Jesus that day, like Mary, did. While others at the table like Judas didn't. Christ gave himself for us so that we could have new life. It's the kind of new life that is demonstrated in the Resurrection of Lazarus. It's also the kind of new life demonstrated in the discipleship of Mary.

You will have chances to gather at Christ's table in this life. Will you accept what Christ did and is doing for you and give yourself completely to him as Mary did? Or will you fight against it like Judas? You have to decide! Do you accept Christ's sacrifice or not? Will you participate in his work to liberate others or not? If you fail to make the decision or put it off that is a decision to play Judas' role. What role will you have played when the curtain closes on your life?