

The Fifth Sunday of Lent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

March 25th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Preparing for Contemplation
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

This past Friday was usual for me: too much to do and less time to do it. I imagine many of you know what I mean. We live in Marin County, after all, where many of us work in ways that demand more than 100% much of the time – often in stressful occupations in high-end fields where staying on the cutting edge matters more at times than our own sanity.

It is true also, that in American life these days, wherever we find ourselves in the workplace or the organizations in which we are called to serve, more is being demanded of less. And being pretty well-educated “Left Coast” folk, we often have a hunger for more information, more knowledge (because, as we all know, knowledge *is* power), more awareness, more erudite arguments and opinions from the stock market to politics to the weather, and a faster, more efficient way of being who we are and doing what we do.

This is a self-indictment more than anything else, so forgive me if you’re well ahead of me on this. Let me know if you are and give me the chance to sit at your feet and learn!

It is true to the American spirit that we are what we do. That good old Protestant work ethic that hounds us whether we are Christian or not, Protestant, Catholic, atheist, Buddhist, or just spiritual. And so, being a good all-around young American guy with a family to support and eyes on the development of the church I serve, I was busy nipping and tucking whatever I could into my schedule as so many of us do this past Friday. And then racing off to see my spiritual director, over the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, barely noticing the beauty of the day, let alone my own hunger for more than just racing from one appointment to the next.

After seven years, my spiritual director has me sized up pretty much the moment I walk in the door to the narrow library where we meet. We sat down, and he started this time. . .

No “How are things going?”

He took out his notebook and said that during his reading and reflection this week something very clear had come to mind – worth writing down and sharing.

He paused momentarily, while I ticked off the seconds in my mind. There was so much to talk about. What our House of Bishops did this week that made international news. Who was being good and who was being bad. How things are going at Church of Our Saviour. Whether I’ve been attentive to the Daily Office as I should be. How many times I’ve committed to the spiritual practice of *lectio*, and whether or not I’ve been spending enough time with my family. Time to check in on my performance. . .

“The antidote to our obsession with productivity,” he said, “is contemplation.”

“Then,” I replied with a grin, “I need more medicine.”

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With Jesus six days from Passover, and, following John’s narrative, six days from the crucifixion, Mary enters, lets down her hair and cleanses his feet with a most expensive jar of perfumed ointment, worth a full year’s wages. The scene is almost as sensual as it is scandalous – a woman who humbles herself to anoint the Teacher’s feet with her hair down – totally submissive, giving herself over completely to this strange and wonderful man who raised her brother from the dead.

In another story in Luke’s Gospel, it is Mary, you will remember, who sits at Jesus’ feet to contemplate while Martha scurries around hurriedly preparing the meal. Here in John’s Gospel, it is Mary again who throws all decorum away, and all considerations of propriety to prepare her savior’s body for burial. She contemplates in action and posture the journey that is to come – something the apostles even can scarcely comprehend though they flutter around Jesus right now as moths around a lamp.

It makes me uncomfortable to contemplate. It made Judas uncomfortable, too – for many reasons beyond his cynical appeal to put an end to the scene – an appeal to the devotion Jesus has demanded to serving the poor; to relinquishing worldly things for the sake of those in need. Cynical, because, as the author of John tells us, Judas had his own hand in the disciples’ common money. But even more cynical perhaps because the terrible thought is that with all his power as one of the twelve chosen apostles, he is shown up by a woman’s utter humility before Christ.

It is always remarkable that many of the greatest Christians at the very beginning of our tradition are not men, who were instantly endowed as they were with prestige appropriate for their gender and culture and named apostles. No, among the greatest Christians at the very beginning were women. Jesus’ appeal to women and children, the poor and broken, the sick and the marginalized, is as radical today as it was in the first century. Those already powerless “get” the Kingdom of God first. In today’s Gospel, the apostles are lounging around the table in good first-century fashion pondering Jesus’ words like good disciples should. Judas is calculating his own agenda and pride. But it is Mary who embodies true faith – that faith true Christians through the ages, men, women, and even children have emulated:

A faith that sees Christ’s death as part of the necessary journey.

A faith that sets aside all personal ambition and relinquishes everything before God.

When we meet a soul truly humble before God, all of our imaginings and machinations of power are shown up and laid bare before the light of Christ. We ourselves are humbled, and sometimes even scandalized as Judas was, terrified to behold the pettiness of power and control that dominates our lives and ambitions.

It’s for this reason that Christianity’s call has always and will forever have a very uncomfortable relationship with power, and a terribly difficult time with domination. Jesus’ call is not to the oppression of others or even self, but picking up the cross and walking the path of humility and a

relinquishing of power until our bare selves are completely open to God's transforming grace – the only power that truly matters in the end.

In today's new Testament reading Paul writes to the Philippians that, for all of his success in attaining to the strictures of the Law of his birth, for all of his placement in the inner circle of the saved – by accident of birth and then by the sweat of his own brow – when confronted with the Gospel of Christ, he sees all his achievements as nothing . . . mere garbage is the way he puts it in language both shocking and illuminating.

There is no room for pride in the Christian faith. Nor is God so worried about our productivity, Paul is telling us. At the end of the day, what's done is done. In a way, Jesus tells his disciples as he quotes Deuteronomy: you will always have the poor with you, meaning, it seems to me, there will always be more to do tomorrow.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, we are all harried these days. In another week, we begin to “contemplate” those mighty acts of Jesus that are the very root of our tradition. Have you stopped yet to contemplate anything this Lent? Even if it is something that the world regards as trivial?

How about this: As I was drafting this sermon last night, I stopped momentarily to contemplate a single red lego Daniel left sitting next to the mouse on the computer desk. The lint on the carpet. For a moment to be just like the lego or a piece of lint, borne on the apparent randomness of existence; a cosmic accident or perhaps a divine event.

We Americans are impatient and rarely have time for such “fluff.”

But it is there that our true spiritual life begins and true vision emerges.

Consider Mary yet again in today's Gospel. Martha is busy again in the kitchen. But Lazarus has been raised from the dead! Mary somewhere, sometime, must have truly contemplated this indescribable act and recognized Jesus for who he truly was. And suddenly the miracle of new life and the strange, upside down grace of God – where an innocent and holy man must die, where the Son of God must endure the cross; where life must be gained, but only through death; where the greatest gifts in the world must be given away; where the best thing we can do for ourselves is forget ourselves. . . Mary understands all this and honors it – with expense beyond her means and with every last shred of her own dignity and pride.

Prepare for Holy Week with that kind of upside-down faith where in order to win you must lose. In order to get ahead, you must quit the treadmill of productivity – if only for a brief moment to reclaim your true humanity in Christ. Notice again the mundane in all of its primordial and vivacious, divine beauty. Stop to see, breathe, listen, and feel again. And find Christ, as you break your own pride – costly and precious – over the feet of the one who saves you. The one who saves you through his death, burial, and new life. *Amen.*