

Gathered Up in Jesus

The season of Lent is both rich and scary. The season is rich because we are invited to dig deep into our faith practices and determine whether we are on the right path to becoming disciples of Jesus Christ. We are encouraged to look at our whole lives and then to lay them alongside the life of Christ and see how we measure up. That is where the scary part comes in.

Being honest with ourselves is a difficult exercise; that's part of why we need forty days to do it. It takes diligence and discipline and a whole lot of grace to see ourselves as we truly are. In fact, it might be argued that we are incapable of doing this Lenten thing on our own. It is simply beyond our capabilities and certainly beyond our inclinations. The only hope we have is to be gathered up in Jesus.

The guiding image for this series is found in Jesus' own words. In Luke 13:34, the gospel text for the Second Sunday in Lent, Jesus tells us how he wants to gather us up, like a mother hen gathers her brood. He wants us to claim him, to run to him, to be loved and cared for by him. But this is not to avoid the Lenten examination. Rather, it is to be able to endure it. We can stand the scrutiny of the questions about the state of our souls because we have one who will love us no matter what we find. We can be honest with our failings and our successes because there is one who cheers us on no matter how we have run the race so far.

The season of Lent is essential for those who truly seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Because a part of what we learn in this time of self-examination is that we are what might be most in need of transformation. We might find that what might need to grow in faith and discipleship is the church and that the transformation of the world begins with building bridges and gathering up rather than with condemnation.

We hope you'll join in with churches around the world as we seek to be gathered up in Jesus.

Ash Wednesday – Piety Practice

March 2, 2022 – [Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

Color: Purple, Gray

PLANNING NOTES

Ash Wednesday is an observance built around the imposition of ashes and not on the proclamation of the Word. The worship team should make sure that the focus is on the ashes and the symbolism that is inherent in them. Even if you don't actually apply them to the forehead or any part of the body, the ashes can still remind us of our mortality and our human sinfulness. This is essentially a call to the Lenten observance; therefore, it needs to take the center place.

The words in the *Book of Worship* are an effective way of presenting the main theme of the Ash Wednesday observance. (See the explanation on page 321 of ***The United Methodist Book of Worship***, also the "Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline," 322.) If your congregation is not used to the ritual of the imposition of ashes, some conversation ahead of time might help them be willing to adopt the practice. There is something significant and moving about being marked as a sign of our faithfulness and willingness to journey toward discipleship.

The theme of the series gives an indication of the mood in which this call is made. It is not one of condemnation, but of encouragement to move into the loving arms of Christ. Ash Wednesday is an acknowledgement of our need for a savior, but also the good news that the savior leads with grace.

So, we create space for worshipers to spend time in prayer and confession. This could be during the imposition of ashes or at other places in the order of worship. The music can carry the twin themes of the call to repentance and the loving grace of Jesus. A hymn like "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 269) does that nicely with "teach us with thee to mourn our sins" (v.1) and "Jesus with us abide" (v.3). Find ways to offer grace without muting the call. Through it all, we are being gathered up in Jesus.

PREACHING NOTES

The Ash Wednesday Gospel text seems a bit of a hodgepodge. It always does when you skip over verses and pick up themes that sort of, kind of match, but then maybe not exactly. Okay, this one maybe less than others. There is a consistency here that we admire, but then a bit of a surprise at the end, it appears.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others” is how the text begins. That seems straightforward enough. Especially when you add in the rest of the sentence – “in order to be seen by them.” Well, of course that’s a problem, Jesus, we can see that. It mutes the effect of the piety practice, even we can see that. It isn’t done for the sake of piety, but to be seen, to be admired by others. “Oh, look at how pious,” we imagine them saying. “Look at how holy, how faithful, how . . .” How what? What might we be going for here?

Sure, I understand a different age and different priorities and all, but I don’t think here in this twenty-first-century world that there is a high value placed on being seen as pious. If anything, that’s a slam against you. Or as some might say, “pious is half a word these days.” “What a pious . . . !” You fill in the blank with the appropriate nomenclature. So, perhaps the warning holds, but for different reasons. Beware of practicing your piety in public, or you’ll be considered a weirdo. Or a throwback. Or something.

And need we say something about “practicing” our piety? Even Jesus tells us we never get it right; we’re always practicing. Right? Like innumerable comedians who get a laugh from the fact that their doctors are just practicing. Ha ha. Of course, we know that while we all could be better at using the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting and almsgiving, practicing in this case—like with our doctor—doesn’t mean learning as much as doing.

It is the doing that is the key to these verses, it seems to me. One inclination of the warning, “beware of practicing your piety,” might be to stop doing it. After all, who can truly be pure in motivations? To make sure that we aren’t doing these things for the wrong reasons—and reasons seem to matter a whole lot to Jesus—maybe we should just avoid doing them at all. Maybe our inclination to be safe would be to avoid the practice completely. And that would, of course, be the wrong inclination, the wrong reaction. The doing of the disciplines, both the

outward and inward disciplines, the ones that work on our soul and the ones that work on our community, is a given. The Lenten invitation to “observe a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word” (“Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline,” *United Methodist Book of Worship*, UMPH, 1992, 322) clearly extends a “just do it” vibe.

We can’t help but ask why, other than the discipline part, which is basically because you’re supposed to, or ought to, or were told to. That never really worked when we were kids, so why would we be content with it now? But why do we do these things, practice this piety? What happens when we do it? Or heaven forbid, we should raise this question: “What do we get out of it?” As preachers don’t you hate that question? “What’s in it for me?” If anything, this faith is designed to turn us outward, and yet we’re always asking the “me” question. It’s frustrating. On the other hand, maybe you love that question. It’s the point of contact question, the so-what question. It is finding out how my life and my practices intersect with Jesus’ life and practices. It is exploring how this faith thing gets lived out in the real world. So, why do we practice piety? I think the answer is there in the text, but maybe it is hidden in the part of the text you were going to ignore: the last three verses.

Those verses seem to be about something else – redundancy to what has gone before. But what if that is where we can find a key that just might set us on this Lenten journey with a whole new perspective – a way of storing up treasures?

First of all, self-denial seem to be about getting rid of stuff, not storing it up. And Jesus takes a hard line about stuff, don’t you think? Or does he? For all that Jesus seems bothered by stuff, he is in favor of treasures. Did you notice? He doesn’t say, “Stay away from treasure; it’s bad for your health.” No, treasuring is okay. It’s what we choose to treasure; that’s the issue. There are some treasures that aren’t worth storing up. Or piling up. Or tucking into the attic so that when you dig it out, you say with a sigh, “What were we thinking keeping this?” The stuff around here just wears out, gets stained and becomes unwearable; it rusts. Rusts? What did they have that rusted in Jesus’ day? Well, the word is “brosis” in Greek. It often refers to food that gets eaten. Consumed. Used up. Worn away until you don’t even recognize it anymore.

No, apparently there is treasure, and then there is treasure. Some treasure is worth treasuring, but some is just fit for the junk heap. How do you know? How can you tell the difference? How do we know we are saving the right things? Treasuring the right things?

Well, some say it is all about the tally sheet. You've got to pile up a good score in heaven. Every act of service is another star in your crown. And our goal is to get lots of stars, lots of jewels. Not to earn our place in heaven – that comes by the grace of God. No, this is about the furnishings. A better mansion, plush carpets, bigger windows, more floors. They're building us a dwelling place out of the materials we send up from here. Some say.

I'm not convinced, frankly. Stuff is stuff. It seems that if Jesus were against too much stuff here, he would be against too much stuff there. Don't you think? So, it doesn't sound like the treasures Jesus wants us to treasure are more stuff, divine or otherwise.

What if our math is wrong? What if it isn't "do this to get that"? What if the treasure isn't the end product, the reward or the payment for our acts? What if it is the act itself? What if it is not the result of our action, but the action. What if the treasure is not something we can hold in our hands, but something we do with our hands?

In other passages, when Jesus shares this secret, he tells someone, the rich young man, "sell everything and give the money to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven." We think, we get something; when we get to heaven, there will be something there because we've done this great thing. Maybe not. He says, "do this and you will have." Go and sell and you will have your treasure. In the selling and giving. That's the treasure. That's the gift. That's the blessing. The doing.

"Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Live your life in such a way that you know the blessing every day. Live your life so that you are treasuring what lasts into eternity. That's what Jesus is trying to point out to us. Some treasure is eaten away, and some treasure lasts, and nothing in this world can take it away. An act of kindness lives forever. Love lived out lasts forever. Goodness outlasts bitterness. Joy endures, while despair fades. An act of generosity is treasured into eternity.

Yeah, it's scary to cast off the stuff that defined a life or seemed to do so, anyway. That is a loss, to be sure. But what cannot be lost are all the moments we've treasured together, the lives that we've lived, the experiences we've shared. Even when we forget them, and I suspect we will, they will be ours in eternity. When we meet, we will remember and be remembered. And what greater treasure can there be than that?

Beware, or rather be aware of practicing your piety. Because of motives, yes. But also, because by being aware, you are engaged in treasure storing. This Lent might be a time for us to reorder ourselves, individually and communally. It is in this doing, this practicing while we are aware of the practice, that will enable us to be gathered up into Jesus.

First Sunday in Lent – An Opportune Time

March 6, 2022 – [Luke 4:1-13](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

This week, worship needs to be seen as a second beginning. Unless your congregation is unusual, many will not have come for Wednesday worship; therefore, this week is their entry into the season of Lent. Much of what was said about Ash Wednesday could be repeated here. It is a time to issue a call to deeper living, to repentance, but with the grace of a loving Christ wreathed around us. Perhaps you could review the "Invitation to the Lenten Observance" (***Book of Worship***, 322) if there are enough who were not present for Ash Wednesday. It is an effective way of providing encouragement for the season of self-examination and self-denial.

We play a little bit with Luke's words in verse 13, how the adversary left him "until an opportune time." You could look at this from two directions. It could be those "opportune times" for temptation, when we are in the midst of struggle or questioning and find ourselves vulnerable to stray from our journey. Or you could talk about the opportune times for growth, for seizing the day perhaps, when we find ourselves drawn closer to the Christ, who wants to gather us up. Lent need not be a constant "downer," where we focus on our failings. It could also be a time when we recognize the joys of belonging, the growth in knowledge and

wisdom, the support of the community around us. It can be a time for knowing we need more, we want more, more Christ, more discipleship, more discipline.

Certainly, there should be space in worship for confession and repentance from sin. But there can also be encouragement and moments of reconciliation and recommitment. Find space and ways of building up, even as we challenge the worshipers to be honest with themselves and with God. Through it all is the image of the Christ who comes not to condemn but to save; the Christ who longs to gather us up as a hen gathers her brood. Offer the sheltering wings of the comfort of Jesus as we worship together.

PREACHING NOTES

Well, that was a waste of time. Sorry, still grumbling about a meeting I had to attend. If I were to count up all the times in my life where I felt like I was mired in futility, a significant proportion of them involve meetings that should have been emails. Just sayin.’ I had half a mind to wander out during the break.

Ever wonder where such a phrase came from? “I have half a mind to . . .” I had half a mind to look it up, but I didn’t. Okay, I did, but I didn’t find anything exciting. “Half a mind” means an inclination but not a decision, some say. “Initial thoughts but no action,” others argue. I have half a mind to ignore them all.

There is something unsatisfying about having half a mind. It is like the song that gets stuck in your head and won’t go away. It’s an annoyance that keeps nagging. It is like a potential that can’t be realized. It is like a temptation.

We are on the threshold of the season of Lent – an opportune time to talk about temptation. We are at the very beginning where we stop and think, “Do we really want to do this or not?” And if we do, what does that mean for our lives for the next six weeks? Can we still function in normal society even though we’ve gotten this Lent journey thing going? What if someone notices, can we go underground for a while in our faith, keep it hidden away? But if we don’t get on board, how do we avoid it, since everyone is running fish specials, which seems kind of weird to me since no mention is ever made of Lent and sacrifice, so what is the point? I had half a mind to skip the whole thing this year and see if anyone would notice.

Not really. I love the season of Lent. I love the opportunity it provides us each year to stop and examine just how much we've been doing with half a mind. At least, I think that is a part of it.

The season gets underway this first Sunday with a traditional reading from one of the gospels. This year, it is Luke's turn. Luke 4:1-13. The temptation is in the wilderness – a great starting place, don't you think? We get a glimpse into the nature of evil. We understand the person of Jesus and the nature of Christ, and we get a taste of the power of temptation. That is pretty good for thirteen verses.

But I'm not sure a theological treatise is what we need as we begin this journey. Lent is about self-examination, about confession and facing one's mortality – "dust you are to dust you shall return" is what we hear as the ashes are applied to our foreheads. We are marked with mortality for this Lenten journey, and that is sobering enough for anyone. But Lent is about more than a simple reminder of the temporary nature of our human condition. It is an invitation to reorder that existence, temporary or eternal.

We begin our journey with Christ in the wilderness because that is where we live. The Spirit led him out (and Mark's version said the Spirit drove him out) so that he could experience what we experience. He was, as the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, "tempted in every way as we are." He was out there hungry and hurting because we are hungry and hurting. And he was tempted by the thought of shortcuts because we are tempted by that very thing.

When the Adversary says, "worship me, it will all be yours," it was an offer of a shortcut. Those kingdoms are Jesus', aren't they? We call him the king of kings! So, the offer must be to claim them without suffering, without dying. Take a shortcut. And we have half a mind to take it.

One of the things about temptations as they are presented in the gospels is that they aren't necessarily bad things. Jesus was asked to feed a hunger, which was something he did later on with power, seemingly conjuring bread from stones to feed thousands. A bad thing? Jesus was given a travelogue of exotic locales and promised that he could be Lord over it all, which was something he offered later when he described being lifted up to draw all people to him. A bad thing? Jesus was asked to put his life in God's hands and trust that God would hold him up, would raise him up, which is something he did later when he climbed onto the

high place on Golgotha and cast himself into the hands of the Father and trusted despite his fears. Surely not a bad thing.

We translate temptation into the tug we feel to have another donut, or the inclination to sleep in instead of going to that meeting we're supposed to attend, or to follow desires we ought not follow. And certainly, those things are a part of what we wrestle with on a daily basis. But even doing good for the wrong reasons can be a part of the trap we find ourselves in. Wrong priorities can lead us astray. Halfhearted or half-minded living is the devil's playground—to reinterpret an old cliché.

This is what Jesus teaches us with his experience in the desert: half a mind is not enough. Jesus invites us to live fully engaged, to think through the implications of our actions as well as our intentions. He encourages us to meet the challenges of this world wrapped in the Word, confident in our relationship with God, certain in the presence of the Spirit with us always.

Jesus never did anything with half a mind, and he invites us to live the same way. The problem is, we have trouble with that. We seem to live in half minds all the time. We are less certain, less focused, less directed than he was. So, how do we compensate? By doing the math. Half a mind plus half a mind equals a whole mind. Right? We need help: that seems to be the obvious solution to our half a mind to wander off the path. Find someone who can help keep us on track. Find someone who will help us think about the choices we make. Find someone who will fill us out. Better yet, find a group of someones – a community of faith that will help make sure we think with a full mind.

This may appear to be a *non-sequitur*: What are you singing this Lent? Lent always seems to be a time to turn to the spirituals, to music in a minor key. We need to sing those songs that speak of hope in the midst of suffering. One constant about this music is that it was powerfully corporate. Even when there was one singer, the purpose behind the music was to lift the hearts of the whole body. So, what are you singing this Lent, and can you find a way to engage in a communal experience? You'll find more than half a mind worth.

The text ends with an ominous note that the Adversary went away until an opportune time. We could spend some time speculating on when that opportune time might have been for Jesus. But it might be better for us to realize that

opportune times come all too often in our lives. Too often, we are living a half-a-mind kind of existence, even when we know better. And then we discover opportune times for temptation, for losing our way, for surrendering our will come when we least expect it.

Second Sunday in Lent – Under the Wings

March 13, 2022 – [Luke 13:31-35](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

What images of Jesus do you have in worship? What words do you use to describe the Christ? What today's text tells us in part is that we need to expand our catalog of images when speaking of the redeeming love of God in Jesus. When Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, the door is open for finding ways to communicate the grace and love that we need to confess and repent.

It might be time for someone to tell his/her story. A testimony of the healing power of grace and love can be a big help to worshipers in comprehending this gift. Perhaps there is a story in the serving ministries of the church, someone who was loved and accepted and served, even while feeling unworthy of such a gift. These stories are ways of letting folks know that grace abounds and still has the power to change lives.

Songs of faith, like God's got the whole world, can be reminders even for the longest-term members of the congregation that God still gathers us together. "Draw the Circle Wide" (*Worship & Song*, 3154) is a newer song about reaching beyond traditional boundaries to encompass all of God's people.

This can be a reminder that our sinfulness does not exclude us from God's grace. We can remember together that no matter how far short it seems like we fall, how far we lag behind on the discipleship path, God has not given up on us; there is still a place for us at the table of the Lord. Let our prayers, even the prayers of confession, be full of thanksgiving for forgiveness and for grace. Let us be inspired to love more, to risk more, to reach out more, to include more.

PREACHING NOTES

I messed up. Yeah, so what else is new. That's what you're thinking, isn't it? Whether you are thinking of me the writer or you the reader, you know messing up. It happens with frightening regularity. Messing up is sort of our standard operating procedure. Our *modus operandi*, our *raison d'être*, and other foreign-sounding phrases that might distract us long enough to get onto another topic! Look! A squirrel!!

Okay, we messed up. It doesn't really matter what happened; this isn't a confessional booth. And in the greater scheme of things, it isn't really all that important – except to the one who pointed out the mistake or neglect, we could say. In that face you can see disappointment and judgment. You can see dismissal, as though everything was summed up in the mistake, as if there were nothing else of value that we might have done that day. We are now defined by that brokenness. I am a sinner. You are a sinner. And we feel about that high. (Picture a thumb and index finger held in close proximity to grasp that last visual.)

There are some experiences, some people who can make us feel small, make us feel insignificant, make us feel unloved. It is a common human experience. A reality sung about in the spiritual, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

It needs to be said that I don't presume to know what it felt like to be a slave during those terrible years in our nation's history. Whatever I have experienced in my life is but a pale shadow of what thousands faced under an unjust system made worse by cruel and dehumanizing treatment. And what millions still face under the ripples of those systems that continue to this very day. I can only stand silent as I listen to their stories of neglect or suspicion or abuse.

Yet, a part of the power of the spiritual is identification. “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home”: Who hasn't had that experience? Who hasn't felt that fear grip them at a weak or a painful moment? It is part of the human condition that there are times when we feel disconnected, diminished, and unloved. There might be tragic circumstances to cause such a feeling, or it may be the result of our own failures. Or it may be a misunderstanding. Or . . . well, you know. Don't you? There are a million things, a million moments that can drive a wedge between us and the world, or between us and those we want to love, or between us and God.

Wait a minute. God? Can we be cut off from God? Or more accurately, can we feel cut off from God? Can we feel as though our sin, our brokenness, our lack can cause God to turn away in disgust or dismissal? Well, duh, you might be saying. That's part of our human condition as well. "Why have you forsaken me?" We aren't the first to shout that from some cross of pain or emptiness. We aren't the first to whisper that in the loneliness of our bedroom, afraid that the words haven't gone any further than the ceiling. "Sometimes we feel like a motherless child a long way from home."

So, what is the antidote? How do we continue in those moments when we are a long way from where we long to be? We listen. We remember. And sometimes we lament.

There is some considerable agreement that in our gospel text for this week Luke is messing things around again. In Matthew's Gospel, this lament over Jerusalem comes on the threshold of the Passion. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem for the last time; he is about to lay down his life. And it is out of that event that Jesus begins with these words, with this desire – to gather the children of Jerusalem (which probably means all the children of God). It certainly makes sense that on the brink of the events that would lead to his death, that Jesus would be lamenting about missed opportunities. So, it does seem likely that Luke took an event out of order so that he could make a point.

But then what might that point be? What does the juxtaposition of the warning from the Pharisees about Herod's homicidal rages and Jesus' lament over the city of Jerusalem say to us?

And does anyone else find it odd that it is the Pharisees who come purporting to save Jesus' skin? These are the guys who would like nothing more than for Jesus to find a speedy and messy end. These are the guys who stumble all over themselves to find tests he can't pass and questions he can't answer. And now we are supposed to believe that they have Jesus' best interests at heart? Yeah right. Even Jesus seems to suspect something because his response is an acknowledgment of a relationship. "Go and tell," he says to them. "Run on back to the puppet master pulling your strings," Jesus says. Jesus declares that he is in charge of his own destiny; he is in charge of his worth and his value; he isn't

planning to run and hide from anyone. He knows to whom he belongs. He is not far from home.

It might make perfect sense that having declared his own sense of belonging to his mission and to the one who sends him on this journey, that he then pauses to reflect on the object of that mission and the subject of the love that comes from the one who sends him. It seems right that his heart would break for those who have said no at the moment he is reminded of the cost he will have to pay.

Besides, he has met the fox, so now he heads to the henhouse. Go and tell that fox, he says, that scavenger, that trickster, that unscrupulous schemer, that his power, the power of destruction has its limits. Having chased away the fox, he then wants to gather the chicks. It is as if Luke is presenting us an option here. Do we find our safety and security in the powers that function out of fear and self-interest at least in part? Do we find our connection, our sense of meaning and purpose in those who seek to define us by amassing a count of our failures and disappointments? Or do we run to the one who shelters us in the shadow of his wings, who is broken and poured out through an unimaginable love for us?

We need to know love like Christ offers. We need to cling to that love, to that hope when we walk through those valleys, and when we feel like motherless children. We also need to be in the business of loving like that. All around us at any given time there are those who feel disconnected, those who feel as though no one cares, no one is there for them. There are those who feel that their mistakes define them in your eyes, who need for you to spread your wings and gather them in.

The second verse of the spiritual says, “sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone.” To be forgotten, to be insignificant, to be unloved is a common experience in our world today. Jesus’ love, flowing through us, each of us, as we deal with one another—in the midst of success and failure—is the antidote. It doesn’t matter how much you’ve messed up, he still wants to gather you as a hen gathers her brood. So, come home. Be gathered up by Jesus. The one who longs to wrap his wings around you is waiting, and offering, and hoping. It may seem like a long way, but it isn’t. It’s as close as a prayer.

Third Sunday in Lent – If It Bears Fruit

March 20, 2022 – [Luke 13:1-9](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

The Christ who gathers us up invites us to live a life of fruitfulness. That's the call hidden in our text for this week. The text starts with questions about blame, about getting what is deserved. Jesus wants to change the conversation. Like a poem from Mary Oliver, he is asking us "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day"
http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_thesummerday.html.)

We all want our lives to amount to something. Jesus gives us that sense of purpose and direction. We are called to bear fruit. Of course, this needs to be explained further. What is fruitful? What kind of fruit? Who benefits from this fruit? But that's part of the exercise: to learn to understand and experience our own fruitfulness.

Worship could be first of all an invitation to the Spirit to help us be more fruitful, asking God to guide us and direct us toward service and witness. We could pray and sing about opening eyes, about seizing the moment, about recognizing our connection to all of humanity and indeed to all of creation.

In addition, we can celebrate service and mission and ministry in the life of the community of the church. Some might be opposed to this elevating of church activities in the time of worship. "We don't want to do commercials," they might say, or "We don't want to emphasize one activity over others." But elevating opportunities for service with the family of God is more than a commercial or announcement. It is an act of worship. We are extending worship beyond the sanctuary into the wider community, even as we are giving God glory by living a fruitful life in God's name.

In the end, we proclaim the word that to be gathered up in Jesus is not simply for our own benefit, not simply to make us better, or feel better about ourselves. Being gathered up in Jesus has an impact on the world around us. The fruit we bear is where transformation can begin to take root.

PREACHING NOTES

“You’re touching me!” “No, you’re touching me, this is my space!” “Mom, he’s touching me.” Or “Mom she’s looking at me!!” Or even worse, “Mom, he’s breathing my air!!!”

Okay, my kids have grown past the sharing a backseat stage. Of course, bucket seats and a third row helped considerably. But those days of squabbling over real estate live on in family stories and remembrances. It brings a smile now, but it was painful at the time. It seemed as if they were looking to pick a fight.

Life seems full of ample opportunities to pick a fight – chances to shift blame or point fingers. Maybe it is a product of our postmodern malaise. It seems worse than ever, somehow enhanced by a pandemic and a still-fraught political landscape. And it goes beyond families into communities or nations. How do we conduct our political conversations these days? Town hall meetings that are mere shouting matches, out-of-season political rallies (is there an election season anymore?) designed to inflame a sense of panic and frustration and the discovery of a political party’s talking points program focused on increasing fear of the other. The enemy. It’s their fault. They don’t play fair. They aren’t like us; they don’t value what we value. We are all weaker because of them. “Mom, they’re touching me!”

It seems worse day by day, season by season. Surely there was a level of civility that we’ve lost these days. Didn’t we used to talk about “the loyal opposition” with respect for the political systems in place? Weren’t public debates designed to help make decisions based on ideas and vision and not on making the other guy look bad? Or did we imagine that too?

And what does all this have to do with anything? Or at least with our scripture text for this week? Surely Luke doesn’t present us with a political hornet’s nest designed to pick a fight. Does he? Luke 13:1-9: Oh, great, an obscure historical reference and an even more obscure agricultural parable. Just what we need here in the season of Lent.

So, Luke introduces this chapter by saying that “some present” came to tell Jesus about an event. We don’t have a clue who these “some present” folks were. Were

they just your average Joes and Janes going about their daily business and trying to get by who wanted to make sure that Jesus had been reading the newspapers? Remember how in school you learned that there were all sorts of speeches that you could learn to give – the persuasive, the informative, the acceptance, the demonstrative, and so on? But what they never told you was that there was really no such thing as an informative speech – at least in our cynical age. Everyone has an agenda. One of the questions we have to ask is, “Why did they tell Jesus this story?” Or why did they pose this puzzle to him? Did they really think he hadn’t heard that one yet?

The truth is, we don’t know about the event referred to here – either one, for that matter. We don’t know anything about a Tower of Siloam and its falling. And we don’t know anything about the Galileans who were killed making sacrifices. None of the other gospel writers mention this event, and there isn’t any real historical account that identifies what happened.

There is speculation and rumor. Pilate, despite the Gospel accounts that make him out as helpless at best or wishy-washy at worst, is depicted elsewhere as a pretty nasty piece of work. Some say that he was exiled to this little backwater of the Roman Empire, and he proceeded to take it out on the natives at regular intervals. He was always rubbing the official divine status of the emperor in the faces of the Jews, who considered it blasphemy. He was constantly revoking the “special status” of the temple treasury and claiming funds for his own purposes. He was frequently spoiling the religious festivals and feast days by making onerous public decrees that prohibited or limited their celebrations.

The story was that there were rumors of an uprising coming to Jerusalem, so Pilate sent undercover soldiers into the temple to find and dispatch the ringleaders, which they proceeded to do with frightening Roman efficiency – right in the courtyards of the temple, spilling human blood to mingle with the animal sacrifices, which immediately profaned all the worship that day and made the temple (the temple, mind you) unclean for a period of days, until the proper rituals could be performed.

Most likely, these “some present” in verse one were there trying to get Jesus to take a side in a political debate. They might have been zealots who wanted Jesus to come out for their revolutionary agenda. They might have been the

establishment who were hoping he would say something that would get Rome interested enough to take care of their problem. Or they might have been people appalled that such a thing could take place and wanted someone to answer the ubiquitous question: “Why?”

True to form, Jesus doesn’t do any of that. He refuses to engage in political finger pointing and name calling. At the same time, he sidesteps the theological issue of whether the people somehow deserved their fate - because if they didn’t, then the world is suddenly less safe, and terrible things happen to innocent people. He does weigh in on this, but only to deny its reality. Were they worse sinners than you to deserve such a fate? “No, I tell you.” Pretty definitive there. But then he goes on with that repent stuff. Wait a minute, Jesus, you just said that sinfulness is not the reason they died so horribly. So, why do we need to repent? It won’t save us from dying!

Ah, Jesus would reply, salvation is not about dying. It is about living. Then he tells the parable that essentially asks us how we intend to live. Do you want to be one of those who simply takes up space? One of those who is a waste of dirt? Or do you want to be one who produces fruit? Do you want your life to amount to something or for your death to be simply another statistic?

This makes all the energy we spend casting blame and picking fights seem kind of pointless, doesn’t it? Jesus’ question in the thirteenth chapter of Luke is nothing less than: “What are you living for?”

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Lost and Found

March 27, 2022 – [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

[Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#) is a familiar story to many, yet it bears retelling. The message of grace and acceptance no matter how far one falls is one we need to hear again and again. But perhaps we might consider reflecting on the older brother as we worship this week. His story might come closer to ours than that of the younger prodigal son – particularly if we are trying to emphasize radical hospitality.

This story reminds us how hard it is to be as gracious as God seems to be, at least as Jesus describes the love of the creator. Like the older brother, we are reluctant. We aren't sure he's learned his lesson; we aren't sure she's paid her dues yet. We hold back from the party that Jesus wants to throw for every soul that wanders into the fellowship of the church.

So, let this worship be an expression of the extravagant grace of God. Even in the midst of this season of Lent, a season of reflection and self-denial. Worship is a feast in the midst of the fasting. Let's sing about amazing grace of the one who welcomes us home; let's pray for new ways to offer grace to our wider community; tell stories of reconciliation even when hope seemed lost.

Yes, it is a day to thank God for welcoming us home from our wandering, but let it also be a day of extending that welcome in as many ways as possible. Draw the circle wide. These are the ones Jesus longs to gather under his wings – the ones outside our doors, the ones not like us. How do we enlarge our vision? How do we open our hearts to see as Jesus sees? How do we scan the horizon outside our walls, longing for those who have not yet found their way home, eagerly hoping for them, for any to come? How far will we run down the road to embrace them? How might we gather them up in Jesus' name?

PREACHING NOTES

I still remember when one of our beloved dogs, Max, had come to the end of his earthly life. Max was the crazier of the crazy dogs. I was convinced he heard voices in his head. He was a mongrel of the most extreme kind; it looked like there were not-dog things in the mix alongside the uncountable dog genetics. Even the vet listed him on his official reports under breed as "white dog." He was a curious looking creature. He was a rescue dog whose previous life was almost too terrible to imagine, the little we knew of it. But his last years were lived out in comfort and love. He was a part of the family, in his unusual, mostly doggy way. And we were diminished without him.

Our other dog, Nick, especially seemed a little lost without his annoying little brother. Many is the time when Nick had to snap at Max who was being a little rambunctious for no apparent reason, jumping on Nick when he was trying to

nap, taunting and teasing, chasing the cat who dared to come into the dog space. But once he was gone, Nick needed companionship. He was too big, but he would sit on my lap with a sigh; or he would sleep in the places Max used to sleep. On the day my wife and son took Max to the vet for the final time, I came home from a church meeting and Nick was lying in the spot where Max's cage used to be.

Max's final weeks were marked by a restlessness we couldn't define. He had trouble settling, was often up and down, lying asleep and then wanting out, wanting attention, wanting something that we couldn't identify. He didn't seem to be in pain, just driven, searching for a satisfaction that he couldn't find here. He loved going outside on sunny days at least. I thought he was solar-powered and needed to recharge his battery by lying in the sun for hours at a time. But before the end, he would go out and wander, pace the fence line, hunt under the hedge around the deck. He was looking for something, wanting something he couldn't articulate. There was something driving him even a little crazier.

The gospel text for this fourth Sunday in the season of Lent is a familiar story. We call it the Prodigal Son, or sometimes the Loving Father. But it is a story about wanting and searching for what seems lost but is always within reach if we know how to look.

It was the madness of wanting that drove the younger son to make his outrageous request, his offensive request. He said to his father, "Why aren't you dead yet? Your value to me is in the stuff that will be mine one day, not in you." If there was ever a son who needed to be slapped down, it is this one. But he wasn't slapped down. He received what he asked for. The father did what no father would do. He broke the bank, broke tradition, broke open his wallet and took it out. Took it all out.

The younger son, the prodigal, ran away as fast as his feet would take him. He ran to satisfy the wanting. He tried everything his fevered brain could think of. But nothing slowed down the wanting. To give him credit, he kept trying, kept searching, kept digging that hole deeper and deeper, until he had to look up to see rock bottom. Give him credit because he ran out of cash. The wad his father handed over evaporated like drops of sweat on a hot sidewalk. He watched his fortunes fade as he plodded along, the hunger as strong as ever, the wanting

unabated, unsatisfied, still driving him on. Until knee deep in pig slop, he came to himself.

The wanting changed. He came to himself, and the wanting was deeper, more real, within reach. Instead of wanting the something indescribable, he wanted something he knew well, something he had experienced. He came to himself and wanted what he had already had and had thrown away. He knew he was no longer worthy of it. But he took a risk and decided that even a taste of what he had was better than this. He couldn't have it all, and he was content with that. He would take the punishment, suffer the indignity, because he was done with wanting. So, he made the long journey back, leaving his madness behind.

But a strange thing happened. His father ran to meet him, gathered him up, and treated him as though he was worthy. As though he was a son. As though he belonged. And he was swept up into the party, welcomed home, where he had all he ever wanted. End of story.

Not quite. The brother, the one left behind, chewed his frustration with his younger brother every day when he marched out to the field to work. And his satisfaction in his work and his home and his family evaporated like drops of sweat on the hard packed dirt he struggled to turn over. He stumbled back in that day, the day of transformation, feeling anything but transformed. When he heard the news, his face became even harder, bitter, like he had eaten a sour apple. His father found him like that, spitting seeds and hatred and begged him to come in and celebrate. But he refused and said, "I've slaved for you all these years and you never gave me anything." Never. Um, wait a minute. Look again. Verse twelve: "He divided his property between them." The older brother got his too. Every day, it was his. Everything was his, double his brother's share because he was older. But he never saw it. He never claimed it. He lived the party; that's what his father told him. But his bitterness, his jealousy kept him from claiming it, from living it. All he had was his wanting. What we'll never know, because Jesus didn't tell us, was whether the older brother ever came to himself.

The younger brother needed near starvation to be able to leave his madness behind. Let's hope the older brother needed only almost losing his brother to move from wanting to generosity, from turning inward to pouring outward. Like the Father. Our Father.

Every life teaches us something, offers us something – if only a chance to love more, to care more, to give more. And the abiding hope that the lost can be found. Rest in peace, Max.

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Filled with the Fragrance

April 3, 2022 – [John 12:1-8](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

This is a service that begs for a multisensory experience. John's Gospel describes the event of anointing Jesus by saying the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Sure, you have to be careful because there are probably some people who are sensitive to perfumes; chat with the musicians to make sure you don't overwhelm them and make it difficult for them to sing. But something in the air, some hint of blessing, of grace, of the sweet, sweet spirit might help worshipers grab hold of this moment. The sense of smell is tightly connected to memory. So, what memories do you want to evoke today as you worship? The baking bread of the home table, perhaps. Fresh baked bread for Communion, if you are in the habit of Communion on the first Sunday of the month, could be invitational, drawing worshipers into the loving embrace of the Christ who wants to gather them up.

We are nearing the end of this season; next week is Palm/Passion Sunday. So, here we can focus on giving honor to the Christ who has journeyed with us throughout this difficult season. Like Mary, we can pour out in blessing praise and worship as we gather. We can offer something precious as we approach the one who loves us more than his own life. What could we leave at the Table as we come forward for the sacrament? An offering? A prayer? A commitment of self, or gift, or time? We consider what we receive, and we should. But this time, what can we give? What act of service could we perform as we move into community at Table together? Multisensory means a lot of things in this context. It could, and perhaps should, mean engaging the whole self in responding to the presence of Christ.

How do we engage the whole self? How do we find ways of connecting what we do in worship with what we do in the world? What can we carry with us to remind us of the connection? What scent, what texture, what vision can go with us beyond this moment of worship? Let the worship team ponder this as they design worship this fifth Sunday in Lent.

PREACHING NOTES

Have you ever received a gift that left you speechless? I don't mean the one that you couldn't figure out or the one that made you wonder if the giver even knew who you were! No, I mean the one that took your breath away, the one that seemed beyond the reach of the giver, the one that must have caused an accountant to gasp.

No doubt all sorts of emotions ran through you as you held that precious gift in your hands. You might have felt excited and ashamed at the same time. Perhaps you were embarrassed by the gift, as though you weren't worthy to receive such extravagance. Maybe you felt bad for the giver, afraid that he had extended himself too far to give this gift, worried that she would suffer because of what it must have cost. And it is also possible that when you did finally find your voice, the only thing you could think to say was, "You shouldn't have!"

We often don't mean it when we say that. We are excited by the gift, flattered, honored. But we say, "You shouldn't have" out of a sense of humility – maybe false, maybe real. But we are glad that they gave it. On the other hand, sometimes we mean it when we say that. We really wish that the giver had not given such a gift. Maybe it feels like a burden to accept it. "You shouldn't have," we think because now we have to live up to your image of us or live up to the gift itself.

And then sometimes an extravagant gift produces anger. At least that is what happened in our reading for this week. A familiar story, here on the brink of Holy Week, the anointing of Jesus.

"Six days before the Passover," which means it is five days before Jesus is killed. So, it is no wonder that he makes the connection between Mary's extravagant gift and his burial. Whether Mary saw it as such is debatable. For her, it was a pouring

out of self and soul; it was an act of surrender and of giving to the one she came to love so deeply. She didn't think about the cost, only the giving.

Jesus didn't think about the cost, only the love behind the giving. John saw this act as a prelude to Jesus' own act of service and giving at the Last Supper only a few days away. John is less concerned about the meal than the other Gospel writers, but he is more concerned with the sacrificial service that Jesus performs for his disciples. Mary shows him that she understands the kind of loving service that Jesus calls for. Even Martha shows she understands this time. The only comment about Martha that appears in this story is the two-word phrase: Martha served.

And then there is Judas. In Matthew's version of the anointing, the complainers are "the disciples." In Mark's version, it is "some were there." Only John identifies the complainer as Judas. Now, Mark and Matthew might also be talking about different events. In their versions, the woman (also unnamed) pours the ointment on Jesus' head. Luke has a story about the anointing of Jesus, and there it is his feet wiped with the woman's hair. But there it is tears that are used to anoint, and Jesus talks about forgiveness and not about his death. So, is it possible that this sort of thing is a regular occurrence?

If that were the case, then Judas' outburst would be even more incomprehensible. If he had seen this sort of thing many times, if he were used to Jesus accepting such gifts, then it seems he should have simply muttered to himself – "There he goes again!"

Judas was a man who knew the cost of everything, but the value of nothing. He was willing to shout at Mary and say, "You shouldn't have," but his wasn't the false humility of a grateful receiver. No, John says it was the cold look of avarice on the face of a person who was aware of what he was not getting. He wouldn't be so bold as to say it should have gone to him, so he condemned the whole act as wasteful.

But you can't help but wonder if John put those words and that parenthetical explanation in the story to cover his own guilt. Maybe he had been the spokesperson earlier; maybe he was one of the "some who were there" and was now looking for someone to blame. Surely, I couldn't have said that, or thought that. That jealousy, that hunger to have could only have come from someone

truly evil, right? (And, like most scholars agree, it is likely that John the Disciple didn't write the gospel that bears his name. But somehow, it seems his imprint is on it.)

Jesus points out, to all of them and to us as well, that no gift is wasteful when it is given in love, no matter how extravagant. No act of service can be demeaning when it is given in love, no matter how humble.

What about that last verse, though? Aren't we in danger of misinterpretation here? Luke thought so. Luke has a consistent call toward solidarity with the poor in his Gospel. And while his story, particularly in the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry, mirrors Mark's version in many ways, Luke leaves out this story completely. It is as if he were sure that we would seize these words as permission to let up in our ministry to and with the poor. He was afraid that we would claim this loophole in the clear command to share and give and help.

"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." What does that mean? Give to Jesus more extravagantly; give to the poor out of duty? Give to Jesus everything; give to the poor some things? Give to Jesus always; give to the poor when you can?

I don't know. Honestly, I am puzzled and troubled by this verse. But I find it hard to believe that Jesus would ask us to back off giving wholeheartedly. What I wonder is whether Jesus is once again speaking to our experience, giving us a warning about how our lives are lived out sometimes. I mean, I am sure that at the time, he was trying to get across to his followers—even the slow ones—that his earthly life was coming to an end very soon. But at the same time, I wonder if he was saying to us that sometimes when we give to the poor, we will see his face and sometimes we won't. Sometimes we will know his will and feel his presence and other times we will wonder what he would have us do and wonder why he seems so far from us. But no matter what, we should give and serve out of love, with extravagance.

We should give so that those who receive might be moved to say, "You shouldn't have." Even though we know we should.

Palm/Passion Sunday – The Lord Needs It

April 10, 2022 – [Luke 19:28-40](#) & [Luke 22:14-23:56](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

It is that “slash” day again—as in Palm/Passion Sunday—as in trying to capture two seemingly distinct moods and experiences in one act of worship. It is almost impossible to do, it seems. If we lean toward the Palm Sunday experience and emphasize the exuberance of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, then we run the risk of missing the weight of the Passion of Christ that prepares us for fully encountering Easter and the Risen Lord. On the other hand, if we put all the weight on the Passion of Christ, re-creating a Good Friday experience, we miss out on the surprising opportunity to claim a savior with shouts of “hosanna” and the waving of branches.

We could argue that the story will be told this week on Thursday and Friday. We don’t need to let this day carry all the weight of the drama. And that is true, for those who will join you on those weeknights or afternoons. But in most settings, the ones who gather on Thursday and Friday are only a portion of the crowd that will gather on Sunday. And while we could say, “Well, that’s their fault; they should have come for the whole experience,” it is understandable, perhaps, yet the story needs to be told. If we don’t owe it to the people, then maybe we owe it to the story to tell it well, to tell it with power and passion and depth. So, even if a good proportion of our worshiping congregation will join us for Holy Week services, we ought to at least point from the parade ground to Pilate’s court and the shadow of Golgotha outside the city walls.

So, how do we do that? We could have a point of transition somewhere in the service, from “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna” to “What Wondrous Love Is This” at the end of the service. We could tell the story of the ride into Jerusalem at the beginning of the service, and let the children lead with palms raised high; and then toward the end of the service, we read of the plot against Jesus and the visit Judas makes to the temple authorities. We could leave it as a cliff-hanger, inviting folks to join us throughout the week. Or perhaps just read the story, the whole Passion story. Read it as reader’s theatre, or as a storyteller would tell the story. Celebrate the procession and then let the story speak for itself.

What we're trying to avoid here is the possibility of a worshiper going from a parade to a Resurrection party without acknowledging that valley of death that goes between – accepting the gift of new life without the call to surrender the old. Too often, we present a “having your cake and eating it too” kind of mentality that produces a watered-down faith that won't sustain us when the shadows envelop, and grief arises. We need to know; we need to be introduced to a savior who is acquainted with sorrow and knows our pain. This is the savior who would gather us up; this is the one who can redeem us.

PREACHING NOTES

Here we are again. We are on the brink of the remembrance of the central event of our faith. Holy Week and Easter shape our understanding of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ more than any other single event. We are, as others have said, Easter people living in a Good Friday world. We are defined by this sacrifice and by this gift of eternity. And it all begins with Palm Sunday.

Well, of course, arguments could be made that it all begins with a baptism and the heavens tearing open that the Spirit might descend like a dove. Or maybe it begins with an announcement in an out-of-the-way synagogue – “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Or does it really begin on a cloud-shrouded mountain of light and glory? Or maybe we should look back at an angelic announcement and claim it began with Incarnation in a back alley of a small town. Or, like John, should we recognize that it began at the beginning, the beginning of all that is, all that we see and know. It was at this beginning that the plan was in place that would culminate in death and Resurrection.

We could argue where it begins until the cows come home. Since I don't have room for those cows, maybe we should just let it go. Let me start over. The curtain rises on this final act in the divine drama to a palm-strewn parade: [Luke 19:29-40](#).

On the one hand, this might seem like a diversion, not a prologue. This event provides a bright spot in a dark time, a respite from the burdensome journey plaguing the whole company. Maybe this is a Sabbath rest that steels them all for

what lies ahead. Maybe it is the calm in the midst of, or on the edge of, the storm. Or maybe it is more.

It is a declaration, this diversionary parade. It is a pronouncement – for these three years of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he has asked for silence. “Don’t tell anyone,” he would say, “keep your knowledge, your revelation to yourself.” There has been and continues to be a lot of speculation about why Jesus told people not to tell. Some argue that it was reverse psychology. He knew the surest way of getting the word out was to tell people not to tell. That never seemed to be a convincing argument to me. It is too devious, too underhanded. Jesus was an up-front kind of person. That means we have to go by his own explanation—the first one he gave—to his mother no less – “it is not my hour.”

He was concerned about time, about the right time. He was, with his Father, ordering these events in the way that would reach the desired outcome. He had to build the story; he had to design the drama so that we who would come to see and hear would finally understand and accept, so that we would understand that his story is our story. We had to see ourselves lived out in him; we had to find ourselves in him. Too soon, and we wouldn’t hear; too late, and we would have missed it. He had to wait until it was time.

Now, it was time. Jesus had an announcement to make. But rather than sending a memo, rather than posting a thesis on the church doors or writing in fiery letters across the sky, he used the language of the culture. He orchestrated a processional drama, an enthronement scene acted out in the symbols that were a part of the common understanding, and he touched a need or hope that was rising in the hearts of the people. This was why they responded to his announcement so readily.

He arranged for a colt, an unridden donkey symbolizing purity and peace. They waved branches as an acknowledgment of his authority. They threw down their cloaks to cover the road to usher the prince into their midst. They shouted the traditional welcome to a new king: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Given his earlier reticence to declare himself, he was practically shouting now. “Here I am,” he announced, “your king, your prince of peace, your savior.” And they heard it, loudly and clearly. That is why they shouted back, “Hosanna!” which

means, “Save us.” Maybe it was mob psychology; maybe it was desperation; or maybe they had an inkling that this indeed was the one who could save them. So, they shouted and pulled branches off trees and threw their clothes into the street as a welcome. They heard.

But the people who gathered weren’t the only ones who heard. Some of the Pharisees (and notice Luke’s careful identification of “some” of the Pharisees – like he is preparing the way for the division that was coming)—some of the Pharisees—heard and didn’t like what they heard. “Keep it down!” they shouted to the self-professed king on a colt. “Shut them up, or there will be trouble.” They had one eye looking down their noses with contempt at the rabble grasping at their palm straws. And the other was cast over their shoulders in fear of Rome who didn’t like any disturbance that they didn’t cause. “Tell them to stop!”

And here is what distinguishes Luke’s memory of this event from the rest. Luke leaves out the “Hosanna” that the other three record. But he is the only one who records this curious response to the plea of some of the Pharisees to keep quiet. “I tell you,” says Jesus, “if these were silent, the stones would shout out!” The necessity of praise is how one commentator describes it, the absolute necessity of praise. When it is time, it is time. The purposes of God will be fulfilled, the only question is, “Will we join in or get out of the way?” “It is time,” says Jesus as he sits astride the humble little colt. It is time for events to unfold, events that can gather us up and carry us to a new reality, a new way of living, a new hope. Or events that we can let pass us by if we so choose.

But choose we must. It is time. Palm reading is a delicate enterprise, but this is our story being told in an ancient text. It is your future, your opportunity. What do you see? Hosanna.

Maundy Thursday – Do You Know What I Have Done?

April 14, 2022 – [John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#)

Color: Purple

PLANNING NOTES

There are always two emphases on Maundy Thursday: One, of course, is the meal. Communion on Maundy Thursday ought not be the same as always. There

should be a different way of serving and a different way of receiving. We need to step out of the normal, comfortable patterns and do something different this night – not simply for innovation’s sake, but to recapture something of the unsettled experience of the disciples as they sat around that table with Jesus. Yet the meal was familiar; they had prepared it as they had prepared it many times before. They knew how things were supposed to go; they knew the words and they knew the actions. But in the midst of it all, Jesus changed things—maybe not dramatically, just some new words, some new interpretation that changed everything.

We too have gotten overly familiar with the ritual—or most of us have, anyway. So, let’s set aside our patterns and find new ways to gather and to serve and to be served. Let’s make circles instead of lines. Let’s serve one another rather than a pastor or Communion steward serving everyone. Let’s change up the bread, use a different cup, drink rather than dip – something that makes us see this familiar ritual in a new way, something that lets us feel it and not just go through the motions. This was Jesus’ way of remaining present, even as he was about to leave this earth. Let’s focus on the presence in the action, in the community, in the words.

The second focus of the service is the commandment. “Maundy” comes from “mandatum,” which is Latin for “command.” And what was the commandment? John reminds us that it was *to love*. *Love one another as I have loved you*. This isn’t just good advice; this isn’t how to overcome division or to move toward reconciliation; this isn’t just good human relations practice. No, this is a commandment. Can you command love? Jesus thought you could, apparently.

But what does it mean to love one another? It is not, of course, about good feelings. Or as Frederick Buechner wrote, “this doesn’t mean your pulse is supposed to quicken every time your neighbor passes” (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, Harper & Row, 1973, 72). It means that you are able to work for the good of the other, the one you’re supposed to love. You are to hold the other in your heart and mind as you live and work—not live and work just for your own good.

A recommitment to obeying that command is a part of why we gather. We remember Jesus, and we remember his words, and we once again pledge to learn

to live by the command. In other words, on this night, we gather and offer ourselves to be gathered up in Jesus by choosing to live by the call to love.

PREACHING NOTES

It is a bit odd that we always go back to the thirteenth chapter of John for Maundy Thursday. Because John is the only Gospel that never really discusses or even depicts the Last Supper. There is no “this is my body” in John, no “Drink from this, all of you.” The very thing we have used to institute this sacrament that we call Holy Communion. How odd is that? It is as if John has a completely different agenda than the other three Gospels. It is as though he missed something vital in the story. Instead, he spends time on this odd little event, a neglect of hospitality, a detail that was overlooked in the party planning. Surely that shouldn’t be the central focus of this moment. Should it?

I know it is useless to try and ascribe inner thoughts to the actors in the gospel drama, but I can’t help but wonder what was going through Jesus’ mind when he got up and grabbed the towel and the basin. Was it a sigh at how such an important cultural greeting was missed by those who were charged to prepare the meal? Was it light-bulb moment where he thought, “Maybe if I show them what I mean, they’ll finally get it?” Was it yet another opportunity to present his incarnated message, to be the words that he spoke? Or was it just a matter of course—he saw a need and got up to fill it, not thinking for a moment about how they would respond to such an act?

In the minds of the disciples, there was something demeaning about kneeling to serve in such a humbling way. That’s why they all managed to overlook the opportunity. But for Jesus it wasn’t demeaning; it was an opportunity to serve. More than that, it was an opportunity to be who he came to be, to fulfill his purpose. After all, he said, “The Son of Man came to serve, not to be served.”

All the teaching about the action came after, when the disciples were confused. “Do you know what I have done for you?” Nope, he could read it in their eyes; they didn’t get it. They were still looking for the best seats; they were still looking for their rewards in heaven, or on earth. They didn’t know what he had done, which means they didn’t know him. At all. We sometimes envy the disciples,

because they got to spend time with him; they got to hear his voice and see his eyes; they watched his hands; they were right there. And they didn't get it. They didn't have any advantage.

Later on, Jesus says "I give you a new commandment" (13:34). That's where the word Maundy comes from. The Latin *maundatum* or *command*. The new commandment, he says later is "Love one another as I have loved you." Except the commandment wasn't new, not really. He had already acted it out in front of them: "As I have loved you." By serving, by getting on his knees, by bending to a task that even fishermen thought was beneath them. "Love like I loved," says Jesus.

It wasn't supposed to be a once-a-year command. The church has turned Maundy Thursday into quite a ritual over the years. The Pope would find some beggars—or his people would find some beggars—and then very publicly would wash their feet. The monarchs of England would do the same, until it got too uncomfortable for them; now they hand out some money: Maundy Money, it's called.

But it was never supposed to be a ritual. It was supposed to be a way of life. Oh, foot-washing isn't a part of our culture; that isn't necessarily what is supposed to be carried on. It is the willingness to serve that is the command. The *Maundy*. On Thursday or Monday or any day. Sometimes it's a good day, all you hoped it to be. Other times, it seems cruel, not what you expected. That's a part of the risk of service. Sometimes it doesn't turn out like you hoped; sometimes it isn't received as you intended. And our inclination is to stop rather than risk doing it wrong. Or maybe we remember that Maundy comes again and again, every time there is an opportunity to serve.

Not just a good idea, not just a clue to better living, not just a suggestion for health and happiness, no, he made it a commandment: "Love one another." And not only that, but it is also the sign that we belong, that we are a part of the fellowship, a part of the family—not by how many Bible passages we read, not by the acts of charity that we perform, not by the hours of pew time we put in throughout our lives, the lives of pure moral character—none of that is the sign that we belong to Christ. All of that is good stuff, and stuff we ought to be doing. But the sign is something else entirely: "by this everyone will know that you are

my disciples, if you love one another” (13:35). It is not about what is inside of you, but what comes out.

How do you show your love for one another? That’s the question in front of us. And who has shown you love like Christ’s love? The question in our “Extravagant Generosity” series for this week is “Who in our church family has made a difference in your spiritual life? Who has been the ‘one another’ for you? How has been teaching you how to be the ‘one another’ for someone else?” For some of those “one anothers,” it is the words that you say; for others, it is the deeds that you do (like picking up walnuts); for some, it is the gifts that you give; and for others, it is the presence and attention that you give. It is in our plans to spend some time in 2022 talking more about how we do this loving one another thing—as spouses, or co-workers, or neighbors, or friends and strangers. But for now, we hear it as an invitation.

It is not an easy one, to be sure. Loving takes time, takes sacrifice, takes effort, especially when we look back and see that what Jesus actually said was not love the best you can, love with what is within you. No, what he said was, “Love as I have loved you.”

Here is where we come back to being gathered up in Jesus. On our own, loving like he loved is beyond our abilities. But when we let that love work through us, it becomes possible, at least a small step at a time.

Good Friday – Are You the King?

April 15, 2022 – [John 18:1-19:42](#)

Color: None, Black

PLANNING NOTES

How do you capture this moment in all its horror and glory? How do you communicate the depth of suffering and the height of sacrifice and love that this day represents? The short answer is that you can’t. Not completely. Not in a way that becomes as transformative as we would like. And yet there is so much here that every attempt can bring us something of the day when it is done with sincerity and respect. It is the task of the worship planning to simply gather at the

foot of the cross and point. Direct the attention of the passersby to the king on a cross.

Here is where we deal with our expectation and stereotypes. We expect our leaders to be strong, to be in control, to be wielders of power in every situation—power as we have come to understand it, power that often results in violence, power that subjugates others. But this king has come to upset all our understandings of what real power is and how real strength is shown. We are encouraged to rethink what it means to follow this Christ, to pledge allegiance to this king. We are called to understand the vulnerability that loving demands, especially on this day.

We tell this story in a whisper. If we choose drama, it would be better to focus on those around the crucifixion rather than on the cross itself. We tell the story of those affected by this moment—the women at the foot of the cross, the disciples who ran and hid, the one who denied him, the one who betrayed him. Depict those stories. Because it is beyond us to capture the crucified king, except indirectly, through these others.

We sing “Were You There?” knowing that had we been there, we would have failed him as assuredly as his other followers did. We sing “What Wondrous Love Is This” or “O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done” because we can barely comprehend love as profound as this. We sing “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” because all we can do is stand and let that shadow fall over us and be amazed that even in this moment, this dying of the light moment, this suffering unto death moment, even here, we can be gathered up into Jesus.

PREACHING NOTES

Each Good Friday, as preachers, we are faced with the question. “Is preaching the best way to proclaim this word? Would we be better off letting the text tell the story?” Perhaps something like a Tenebrae service makes more sense on this day. Here is a service on our website that you could use:

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/a-service-of-tenebrae>.

Some use the Tenebrae service on Holy Thursday; others on Good Friday. The purpose is to let the story tell itself without comment.

Some see Good Friday as a time for drama, whether it is a depiction of the crucifixion or the trial that led up to it, or perhaps it is an after-the-fact letting those who experienced it tell their stories with dramatic imagination. Others will say that it is time for music to tell the story. Whether there are words—a cantata or oratorio, or collections of hymns and songs and spirituals—or whether it is instrumental, music can carry a mood or tell a story in ways that move beyond the surface and move down into the soul. Or perhaps it is a time for silence. “Be still and know,” says the psalmist (Psalm 46:10). Create a visual space focused on the cross and then just sit in silence and contemplate this moment, this gift, this sacrifice. Maybe that is better than preaching.

The admission needed here is that words cannot contain this event. You cannot sum it up; you cannot explain it. It is beyond you, preacher, beyond all of us. At best, we can capture a slice, illumine a moment, direct attention to something that may not sum it all up but might highlight something that provides a point of access, an entry point into the whole.

So, you can’t preach the whole thing. You can read the whole story, but it would be hard to preach the whole story. You can focus down. Pick a moment upon which to focus, not because it covers everything, but because it emphasizes one thing.

Perhaps it is the trial that captures something of the inhumanity of systems of power and prominence or the dialog with Pilate that unpacks the essence of truth and an understanding of what it means to rule in this world. Some will focus on the historical details of the crucifixion, though I would be cautious with that. Others might want to examine Jesus’ own words, either from the cross or prior to the crucifixion.

One enduring tradition is to preach the seven words from the cross. Here is one such approach, though I confess I’m cheating and taking from Luke’s account rather than John’s for this specific word from the cross.

Luke 23:39-43: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Today. That is the word that has always jumped out at me in this Word. “Today.” I have wrestled with that word for years, I have jumped from meaning to meaning, from assumption to assumption, from one glimpse of understanding to another,

trying to figure out what was being said in that moment. And I still don't know. That is my confession here in this space. I don't really know what was being said. And I suspect that the only one who really knew or really discovered was the thief, the criminal hanging there with Jesus on a cross that dark Friday afternoon.

One commentator wrote that this just might be the first Christian sermon—not the Word from Jesus, but the confession of the criminal:

"Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:40-43).

It is not a long sermon, but it is a sermon, nonetheless. The argument is that here is the first one who realized that Jesus, the man dying on a cross, was the Messiah because he was dying in innocence. His death was sacrificial; whereas, the thief's death was selfish—he died for his own deeds. And then having realized this, and having made the proclamation to his fellow criminal if to no one else, he then asked for something from the one he identified as his Lord.

What is amazing is what he didn't ask for. He didn't ask for rescue. "Get me down, get us down!" That is what was expected, and what the other asked. But this one asked to be remembered. "Remember me." *When you get where you are going, remember me.* That's all. Maybe what he meant was, "Come and get me," but that isn't what he said. So, maybe all he really meant was, "Remember me. Don't let my life be summed up by this death. Remember me as the one who recognized you. Remember me as someone who was more than the sum of his sins. Remember me." That's what he asked for.

What he got was a whole lot more. "Today, you shall be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Most folks hang their attention on the word, "Paradise"—the promise of joy unending, of completion, of wholeness—the green fields of heaven stretching out into forever waiting for the final breath of the one who claimed faith in a man he met while dying. It is a wonderful vision and certainly one worth clinging to.

Yet there seems like there should be more. There's that word "today." I know that given the fact that death was mere breaths away, at least for Jesus, he could have been referring to the fact that shortly Jesus and his new friend would be gamboling through those green fields. It was a sort of "hang on until we get through the messy bit right now and then we'll find our way to the garden"—which is the literal translation of paradise.

Even so, I think we are missing something if that is the interpretation we glean. That word "today" seems even more immediate. It carries the sense of right now, this very moment, not just within a twenty-four-hour time span. But how can that be? How can Jesus be inviting the thief, the criminal . . . (actually the word "thief" is never used. Mark calls them "bandits," which is a term used for those who stir up trouble, often attacking foreigners. Luke calls them criminals. So maybe thief isn't accurate, and criminal is too vague. Perhaps terrorist would fit better in this context.). So, how can Jesus be inviting this terrorist into Paradise, even while they hang, dying on a cross?

Maybe the answer is in the other phrase of our second Word: "with me." There is a singer named Sara Groves who has become one of my favorites. She has a song titled "What Do I Know" on her album *Conversations*. In the song, she reveals that she has a friend who has just turned 88 and is afraid of dying. Her faith is still strong, she "grew up singing about the glory land, and she would testify how Jesus changed her life. It was easy to have faith when she was thirty-four, but now her friends are dying, and death is at her door." A not uncommon experience, we might say. And the singer, Sara, wonders how to comfort her, how to strengthen her for what is to come. And what strikes her first is what she doesn't know. Here is the refrain of "What Do I Know": *I don't know that there are harps in heaven, / Or the process for earning your wings. / I don't know of bright lights at the ends of tunnels, / Or any of those things.* ("What Do I Know" lyrics © Music Services, Inc.)

What we don't know about eternity is profound. And when we look at what Jesus told us, there isn't that much that we can add. Jesus didn't seem that interested in resolving our need to know exactly what was going to happen to us when we die.

In fact, we might argue that he wasn't that interested in resolving our need to know what was going to happen to us while we live, except in the most general of

ways. We aren't told what works and what doesn't. Jesus doesn't give us the twelve steps to a better life or anything like that. What he offered us is a relationship. "Follow me," he said. "Today you shall be with me in Paradise," he said. "Where two or three are gathered . . . I am there" (Matthew 18: 20). "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Sara Groves resolves her dilemma this way: "*But I know to be absent from this body / is to be present with the Lord, / and from what I know of him, / that must be pretty good.*" ("What Do I Know" lyrics © Music Services, Inc.)

"Today you shall be with me in Paradise." Eternity is not about a place; it is about a person. It is about a relationship. And when Jesus spoke those words to that terrorist dying on a cross, he meant right now, right then. Paradise for that man was nothing like a green field or garden of delights; it was a cross that was robbing him of life. And yet in that moment, he found life, abundant and full life. Paradise begins when we enter into a relationship with Jesus. Eternity starts now, not just when we die, but right now when we reach out for the nail-scarred hand and realize that we are not alone.

Life is often hard, and death is a part of the life we know. But eternity breaks through the hardness and transcends the death today and every day that we claim Christ as Lord. That must be pretty good.

However you choose to preach this day, this event, this story, resist the temptation to explain. Lean into the invitation to join, to be with, to declare allegiance to the king who died on a cross. And let the story be the story.