

LENT: IN FAITH WE JOURNEY WITH JESUS

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 25, 2007

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

A Lavish Act of Love and a Humble Act of Service

Costly perfume ... an extravagant act ... a meal ... The elements of this week's reading from John's Gospel foreshadow Jesus' impending death.

Passover is six days away (12:1), and the final journey to Jerusalem is imminent (John 12:12). Jesus' "hour" is at hand. The gospel writer's use of the word "hour" (or "time") appeared earlier (2:4; 7:30; 8:20) and will be reintroduced in 13:1. It is a symbolic reference to the hour of Jesus' glorification – his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Jesus has returned to Bethany, having come from a town called Ephraim in the Judean wilderness. Prior to traveling to Ephraim with his disciples, he had been in Bethany where he raised Lazarus to life (11:1-44). Inserted in between the two accounts of Jesus in Bethany, the gospel writer alerts his hearers/readers that there is a plot to kill Jesus (11:45-57).

Upon arriving at the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, a dinner awaits Jesus. Martha serves, Lazarus and Jesus are seated at the table (with others), and Mary positions herself at Jesus' feet where she proceeds to anoint his feet with expensive perfume and dry his feet with her hair. [In the synoptic gospels, two other accounts of an anointing are associated with events surrounding Jesus' passion (Matthew 26:1-13; Mark 14:3-9). Both of these accounts are often referred to as "The Anointing at Bethany." The venue is the home of Simon, a leper; an unnamed woman pours a costly ointment on Jesus' head. In Luke's account of a similar anointing (7:36-50), Jesus is at the home of a Pharisee named Simon; a woman described as "a sinner" bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, while anointing them with a precious ointment.]

The text from John's Gospel seems to mirror Luke's account of Jesus' visit to the home of his friends in Bethany (7:38-42). Martha is described as the one who welcomed Jesus into her home and attended to the household tasks, whereas Mary is at the Lord's feet, attending to Jesus' words. In John's account, the primary focus is on Mary's lavish act of love and devotion which prompted Judas Iscariot's rebuking remark; a reference to Martha's serving her guest with a meal appears to be given short shrift (12:2). (To be sure, if Jesus and his disciples are just returning from the wilderness, they are probably

famished!) Yet, both actions – one that is extraordinary and extravagant and one that is ordinary and everyday – demonstrate the love and devotion the sisters had for Jesus and their response to discipleship. Both actions also point to John 13 where Jesus illustrates the meaning of true humility by hosting a meal for his disciples and washing their feet.

In this season of Lent, we are called to reflect on the cost of discipleship. Loving acts of humble service define us as followers of the One who “came not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45, *NRSV*); a lavish act reveals that we are ready to follow and not count the cost in responding to Jesus’ extravagant love for us.

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Finland – With prayers for translation projects in Northern Sami and sign language, and on the preparatory work in Romani, and with prayers for the Finno-Ugric translation projects in partnership with IBT Helsinki, and with prayers for the European Publishing Group meeting to be held in Finland, and with thanks to God for the Erzyan-Mordvin New Testament and the Karelian-Olonets Book of Psalms; **Sweden** – With thanks to God for progress and financing of work, particularly the HIV/AIDS projects in Arica, and with thanks to God for the gifts and pledges for a new Bible bus, and with prayers to meet the challenge of finding ways to make the Bible well known throughout the country; **Norway** – With thanks to God for the impact of the new translation of the New Testament in the two main Norwegian languages, and with prayers for the development of study helps aimed at young people, and with prayers for the teams translating the Old Testament into three Norwegian languages and for new staff members who are developing programs for Bible engagement.

Activity Corner: Service Project

Supplies needed: Bible; local newspaper; newsprint or large sheet of paper; marker.

Read together Philippians 3:7-11 and discuss what it means to value knowing Jesus as Lord. In what ways can you demonstrate your love and devotion to Jesus? Encourage members of your household to look through a local newspaper (or your church newsletter) to learn about service projects in your community. Decide on a project; using a sheet of newsprint (or large sheet of paper), make a list of actions in relation to the project and assign activities among members of the household. At the completion of the project, encourage each one to share how their role demonstrated being a disciple of Jesus.