

## 5 Lent, Year C

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Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

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**Some things matter, and some things don't.**

That's the conclusion Paul comes to in our reading from Philippians today.

It begins with Paul listing all his bona fides like it's his LinkedIn profile. He spells out that he is an Israelite, God's chosen people; circumcised at eight days old; descended from the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe of Israel's first king, Saul. He's Hebrew born, meaning he's not only of pure racial descent but—unlike many Jews in the diaspora—his family had maintained their knowledge of the Hebrew language. Plus, he was trained as a Pharisee and was considered righteous and blameless under the law.

Despite all the power and privilege that would have come with these credentials, Paul says he counts them all as loss after having his life changed by Jesus. The word we read as “rubbish” is translated from the Greek word *skubala* (SKOO-baa-lah). While we hear “rubbish” and probably think “trash,” *skubala* was the impolite word used for “excrement.”

Paul is saying that his entire identity was a load of...a four-letter word I can't say from the pulpit.

Paul recognizes that this status means nothing to Jesus. Through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, everything has changed. And Paul knows that Jesus, our friend, invites us to share in the mystery and power of these with him.

**Paul realizes that some things matter, and some things don't.**

The Gospel reading today has Mary of Bethany coming to the same realization. Jesus is in Bethany days before his triumphant entry into Jerusalem at a dinner party in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Jesus, Lazarus, and the disciples are seated around a table sharing a meal. Martha hustles around with platters of food and pitchers of wine, and Mary seems to float around the periphery. I imagine that her eyes, her ears, and her thoughts were fully on Jesus, this captivating, magnetic man whom she had already seen work wonders when he raised Lazarus from the dead.

Something about Jesus compels Mary here to retrieve what was surely a prized possession: a pound of perfume made of pure nard. I say this was a prized possession because as the Gospel points out it was worth three hundred *denarii* (din-AIR-eee), roughly the equivalent of a year's wages. This was likely a family heirloom due to its worth. One can imagine it being something like the fine china that gets passed down through our families today that is meant for “very special occasions,” but decades pass with it just sitting in a cabinet because no occasion is ever deemed that special.

But Jesus? Jesus is that special.

Mary is completely trusting of Jesus and unconcerned with anyone else. She loved him so much that what others may have thought meant nothing to her.

This is good because Mary breaks all kinds of social norms here. If Martha got frustrated with Mary before for sitting at Jesus' feet in the place of a disciple, she probably really lost it here. If this were *The Office*, this would be the moment when Jim looks awkwardly at the camera.

Not only does she pour a whole pound of perfume out; she pours it on Jesus' *feet*. Yes, anointing was a thing, but it was usually done on a person's head. That was a sign of honor, but Mary doesn't look so high as the head of Jesus. She bows down and—in a foreshadowing of Jesus' own actions on Maundy Thursday—anooints his feet. Not only that, but she's also got her hair down because she wipes the perfume onto his feet with her hair. A Palestinian woman with her hair down in public was the sign of a loose woman.

And the smell!

Think of how overpowering a single spray of a strong perfume can be. She poured out a whole pound of it. And as Jesus says, this was a perfume that was used for the anointing of dead bodies, which was done to mask the odor of decaying corpses. The smell of Martha's meal is suddenly overtaken by what these people knew as the smell of death. The sense of this for them had to be the way we might think of the smell of formaldehyde.

The reality of death comes over the table . . . but that's right where Jesus is. And despite Judas and probably others chastising her, Mary's focus remains on Jesus.

**Because Mary knows that some things matter, and some things don't.**

In a few moments, we are going to welcome Jayson Smith into the Church through baptism. In baptism, Jayson will be united with Christ in his death and resurrection and receive new life in the Holy Spirit.

We're not supposed to do this during Lent.

We don't typically have the baptismal font front and center while the altar is still draped in purple. Most years, the Christus Rex is also draped, but in what might have been the workings of the Holy Spirit this year, that didn't happen. And so we get this strange juxtaposition of baptism, Lent, and our triumphant King all at once today.

Which is strangely fitting because while we may be waiting to celebrate Easter, Easter is already here. And just as Paul realized, the reality of Easter changes everything.

We all get mired in the busyness of the day-to-day. The stress of work and life and expectations that we place on ourselves or others force upon us can become so overwhelming that we find our lives consumed by things that don't really matter. We are all just dragging ourselves from one obligation to another trying to live up to someone's idea of what we're supposed to do.

Well, you're not supposed to call your family and religious heritage a load of BS, but Paul does.

You're not supposed to act all weird around your dinner guests, but Mary does.

You're not supposed to celebrate baptism during Lent, but we are.

Maybe all we're supposed to do is look to Christ . . . and let go of the expectations that drag us down . . . and come to the table where love and death and resurrection mingle together . . . and share Jesus with each other.

**Because some things matter, and some things . . . really, really don't.**

**But Jesus? Jesus always matters.**

Amen.