

**“Thrifty Prevarications”**  
**John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4-14; Isaiah 43:16-21**

**Lent 5**

**Isaiah 43:16-21**

<sup>16</sup>Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, <sup>17</sup>who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: <sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. <sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. <sup>20</sup>The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, <sup>21</sup>the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

**Philippians 3:4b-14**

<sup>4</sup>If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

<sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup>Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

■

## Introduction

In a village called Bethany, there was a family of siblings, all of whom Jesus loved very much: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

One day Jesus, surrounded by his disciples, was given an urgent message from Mary and Martha, saying that Lazarus was very sick.

When Jesus was told the message, he said to the people around him, "This is for God's glory." So he stayed two days longer in the place where he was before setting out for Bethany, and then finally said, "Let's go back to Judea."

And here is an excellent example of the pattern in John's gospel that Tom Long has called "Question-Answer-Dumb Response."

They said, "Look, Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" That's the question.

Jesus answered them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

And the disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right."

Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead." He said, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

By the time they got to the outskirts of the village, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days.

Martha ran out to meet Jesus and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

He said, "Your brother will rise again."

She said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

And Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe.”

Martha went back and called her sister Mary, and then Mary came to where Jesus was, and kneeling at his feet, she said the same thing as Martha, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And she was crying.

And he was deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” And he cried, too.

He came to the tomb, which was a cave with a stone lying against it, and he said, “Take away the stone.”

And Jesus looked up, and prayed, and then shouted: “Lazarus, come out!”

And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. And Jesus said, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

It was some time not too long after that event that his friends invited Jesus and his disciples to dinner, and that’s where the reading from the gospel begins.

### **John 12:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

<sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

<sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

■

## The Sermon

Can you see him there at the table, with you, at an intimate dinner party among friends with something to celebrate that is infinitely deeper than any outward festivity could convey.

John O'Donohue wrote about Jesus' eyes:

I imagine the eyes of Jesus were harvest brown,  
The light of their gazing suffused with the seasons:

The shadow of winter,  
the mind of spring,  
The blues of summer,  
And amber of harvest.

A gaze that is perfect sister  
To the kindness that dwells  
In his beautiful hands.

The eyes of Jesus gaze on us,  
Stirring in the heart's clay  
The confidence of seasons  
that never lose their way to harvest.

This gaze knows the signature  
Of our heartbeat, the first glimmer  
from the dawn that dreamed our minds,

The crevices where thoughts grow  
long before the longing in the bone  
sends them towards the mind's eye [...]

A gaze full of all that is still future  
looking out for us to glimpse  
the jeweled light in winter stone,

Quickening the eyes that look at us  
to see through to where words  
Are blind to say what we would love,

Forever falling softly on our faces,  
His gaze plies the soul with light,  
Laying down a luminous layer

beneath our brief and brittle days  
until the appointed dawn comes  
Assured and harvest deft

To unravel the last black knot  
And we are back home in the house  
that we have never left.<sup>1</sup>

By this time, everything around Jesus is about life, and death, and life.

Even this small gathering, a quiet dinner party thrown just for the person who had raised their brother from the dead.

And that brother is there at the table, too.

I won't ask you to go here right now, but I had *wanted* to ask: Who are the people you most want around you at the dinner table?

But let's not do that just now. For some of us, it's too powerful and too painful; it's like having a dream of someone who's gone, and then you wake up and have to face the grief all over again.

But for Martha, who expresses her love in doing, in providing, in making things work properly and wonderfully;

and for Mary, who expresses her love in being there, in listening, in attending, in creative demonstrations of humility and gratitude;

the implications of this dinner party are beyond words.

Mary went and brought out a pound of perfume made of a substance called nard, or spikenard—incredibly expensive, because it had to be imported, literally, from the other side of the world. Imagine the odyssey it would have taken to get that substance from one place to another, along the ancient Silk Road, or the spice trade routes by sea, 2,000 years ago.

Mary took a pound of perfume made from that painstakingly imported substance, and anointed Jesus' feet with it—

those blessed feet,

which had brought him to Bethany when it seemed like all had been lost;  
the feet that had carried him into the village, to the front of the tomb,  
where he reached into the dead, empty darkness  
and called her beloved brother  
back from the primordial void  
which had swallowed him whole,  
and brought him out like a newborn baby,  
back into the light of life.

The nard is supposed to be profoundly aromatic, and when she had anointed his feet, the whole house filled with that beautiful fragrance.

She had demonstrated how much she valued him by pouring an abundance of the rarest ceremonial perfume on his feet;

And now, she wiped his feet with her hair.

For Mary, it was an outward demonstration of an inner light: her faithfulness, her trust, her humility, her cherishing of him, all embodied in a profound and powerful gesture.

For Judas, not so much.

He watched her do all that, and said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

John says Judas was the one who kept the common purse for Jesus and the disciples, and there were no checks and balances, so he had the freedom to embezzle at will, of which opportunity, John says, he regularly availed himself.

So we can imagine that when he talks like he's got a true concern for the welfare of the poor, he may be prevaricating a little bit—deviating from the truth in a way that's cleverly manipulative enough that you wouldn't dare speak against him, because then it would come off like *you didn't care anything about the poor.*

And nobody wants to be quoted on the record like that.

It's a brilliant verbal maneuver: clever, strategic, self-aggrandizing, and difficult to counter.

Which makes things a bit complicated since it's just cover for an unimaginative, unloving, utilitarian and misleading scheme on Judas's part.

Which then makes things complicated for us, too, since we—and I mean not just people in general, but we, the people of this community, in our various and sometimes overlapping entities—spend enormous amounts of energy strategizing, plotting, figuring, maneuvering, calculating, outsmarting.

We are good at it; we're adept, and clever,

and we are dedicated to our various noble causes,  
whose purposes we serve with sophistication and nuance  
and appropriately intense levels of enterprise and commitment.

We who follow Christ have a world of goals and objectives:

Care for the poor, advocate for justice,  
feed hungry people, offer reconciliation for frayed relationships,  
care for an environment that has for too long suffered humanity's abuse,  
pursue peace in our community and the world,  
strengthen the weak and love our enemies  
and support those who give of themselves  
to improve human lives.

We also have all kinds of other goals and objectives, some noble, some not,  
most too complex to be able to clearly tell the difference:  
support our institutions, defend against detractors, preserve our way of life,  
carve out a niche,  
leave something for those who come after us,  
make sure we're remembered, and remembered well,  
put a little money away,  
not rock the boat too much....

And so it becomes particularly crucial for those of us  
who are as clever and sophisticated and politically astute as Judas Iscariot,

to recognize, like a driver coming into a patch of fog,  
when the line starts to become a little hazy  
between pursuing our own self-interested motives,  
and discerning God's will.

Paul said, look, I've got a resume to beat anybody's.

If anybody else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:  
circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel,  
a Hebrew born of Hebrews;  
as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;  
as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Seriously, he said: I've got a better resume for being religiously correct than anybody else.

But I regard all these professional advantages and privileges and abilities—all this perfect resume, all the sophistication of my background—as loss,

because the value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord surpasses everything.

“For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

Paul recognized that there were some things he had that he could be very proud of, but that it was time for him to lose. Namely, anything that elevated him that didn't really have anything to do with living for Christ.

We who follow Jesus while living in the world of commerce and threats, and poverty and abundance, have various goals and objectives.

But we have one priority: faithfulness to God, and to the mission of Jesus Christ: to spread the good news, and to live and die to share abundant life, with generosity and kindness and justice and forgiveness and love.

It's up to us to be able to distinguish between talking a good, sophisticated game in order to elevate ourselves, and recognizing what is truly important, what has the integrity of true, humble, obedient, trusting faith, hope and love:

for others, and for the God who has given us everything,  
even God's own self,  
so that we could safely walk away from a life of illusory gratifications  
and into a life of true holiness and real love.

A prayer by Ann Weems:

O God, from whose eyes the measure of our faith is not hidden, wrench from us now all religiosity, all rules and regulations of our scheduled selves that separate us from your Holy Spirit.

O God, who calls each of us by name to be the church, give us love enough to make a difference, give us vision enough to follow, give us endurance enough to hold steadfast in the face of the unholy.

O God, who claims us as disciples, bless us now and touch us with your holiness that we might have commitment enough to be good news to the poor.

O God of the bruised, we pray for healing. Comfort those who cry in dark corners: the lonely, the strangers, the weary, the fearful, the disappointed, the anxious, the depressed, the forsaken, the dispirited, the grieving, and those who lie in sickness and in pain.

O God who wept over Jerusalem, open our eyes to those around us who scream in silence the depth of their despair.

O God of compassion, heal our hard hearts to tenderness.

O God of the oppressed, fire us with justice that we might proclaim liberty to the captives.

O God who gave us the rainbow and parted the Red Sea, we dare to pray for miracles for the powerless.

O God of the hungry, we pray for those who have not bread. Remove, O God, the bondage of hunger by removing our shackles so that we might share our bread.

O God of the homeless, we pray for those who have no land. We pray that you will open the doors of our hearts and let your wandering people in.

O God of the captives, have mercy on those who must live out their lives enslaved to someone else because of race or politics or economics or faith. Loose our bonds that we might risk our own securities on their behalf.

O God of peace, give peace to our hearts and to our nation and to our world.

O Lamb of God, have mercy upon us!<sup>ii</sup>

Keith Grogg  
Montreat Presbyterian Church  
Montreat, NC  
March 13, 2016

---

<sup>i</sup> John O'Donohue, "The Eyes of Jesus," in *To Bless the Space Between Us*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Ann Weems "Have Mercy on Us" in *Kneeling in Jerusalem*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.