

Giving It All Away

I'd like to start with a few vignettes. A seminary professor went to a Christian "heavy metal" rock concert. There was young man seated next to him who was wearing a T-shirt with a Christian message on it. He also had several pieces of jewelry and body piercings that were crosses, and several religious tattoos. The professor struck up a conversation with the young man, and the young man was eager to talk about his faith. "I love Jesus," he said, "I'd do anything for Jesus. I'd die for Jesus!" "What church do you go to?" the professor asked. "I don't go to any church," the young man said, "Church is too boring." "Now hold on a minute," the professor said, "You say you would die for Jesus, but you won't be bored for just one hour once a week for Him?"

A noted Christian speaker was giving a talk. He said to the audience, "Imagine you see a child drowning in a pond. You could jump in and save him, but if you do, you'll ruin your new \$200 athletic shoes. There's no time to take the shoes off. How many of you would jump in to save the child and not worry about the \$200 shoes?" All the people in the auditorium raised their hands. "Well," the speaker said, "then why haven't all of you written a \$200 check to send to help children Haiti? There are children there just as much in actual need there as that hypothetical child in the pond."

Several years ago, at another church, one of the Council members was very excited. He had been to the liquor store and they were having sale. "They had these huge jugs of wine on sale for really cheap," he said. He had bought several. "We'll have enough Communion wine to last us for years," he added proudly. When we tasted the wine, we didn't have to be connoisseurs to know it was bad. Very bad! Communion wine doesn't have to be a rare, fine vintage, but that wine would have been better used to clean out a clogged drain rather than to go in a chalice.

These vignettes, of course, are all about values. How do we rate the value of things? What value do we put on people? What value do we put on worship, which raises the question, what value do we put on God himself? And how much does God value us? Today's scripture readings deal with those kinds of questions, especially the gospel reading.

Our reading today, John 12:1-8, finds Jesus in Bethany at the home of Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha. This is the Lazarus that Jesus had previously raised from the dead. Jesus' love for the family was well known. They held a dinner in Jesus' honor, much like we might do today, but at the dinner Mary did something that would be very strange in our culture, and not quite the norm in that time and place either. She took a rare and expensive perfume and anointed Jesus feet; then she wiped his feet with her hair. It would have been the custom to anoint the head of a guest with perfumed oil, that would have been a symbol of respect and honor in that culture, but there is no precedent for anointing the feet and wiping them with one's hair. What was going on there?

If we would read the last verses of John's gospel chapter 11, which come right before the reading assigned for today, we would see that there was already a plot being hatched to kill Jesus. Also, if we would read the rest of chapter 12, we would see that there was plot to kill Lazarus too. Having the man Jesus raised from the dead around would not be wise if your plan is to discredit Jesus. The one time it would be appropriate to anoint someone's feet with aromatic oil would be when the person was dead. That was part of the way that a body was prepared for burial in those times. So whether Mary realized it or not, her strange, emotional act of devotion toward Jesus was a prophecy of his impending death just a few days later. Much as Lazarus' resuscitation foreshadowed Jesus' Resurrection, so did Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet prefigure his death.

Also unusual about Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet was the cost of the perfume she used. The ever-critical Judas said it could have sold for 300 denarii. That's a year's wages! Sure, anointing Jesus' feet was a nice, if bizarre, gesture; and giving the whole house a nice aroma for a while must have been pleasant. But was it worth a whole year's salary? Judas didn't think so.

Judas suggested that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. John the Evangelist is quick to point out that Judas was a thief and that his motives may have been less than altogether altruistic. Still, we have to concede that Judas has point. There is no lack of needy people out there. How can we spend money on aesthetics when people are starving? Why haven't we all gone broke helping the poor? These are questions individuals and churches have to ask themselves all the time: How much of what God has entrusted to us can we spend on helping others and what do we dare spend on ourselves?

There is much that could be said about Jesus' statement, "The poor you will always have with you." Jesus was definitely not denigrating the plight of the poor. Jesus sympathized with the poor and encouraged those with resources to give alms. Perhaps Jesus realized that his followers did not have the resources to take care of everyone adequately, and that the unrepentant world will not take care of them, so there will always be an underclass. Perhaps too he realized that his true followers would always seek out the poor and destitute to be the recipients of their ministry. Whatever Jesus meant, it is clear that while caring for the poor is important, worshipping him is even more important.

In the reading we heard from Isaiah, God says he created his Chosen People to declare his praise, that is, to worship him. He also says that his covenant now extends not just to His Chosen People Israel, but to all people. In other words, we were created to praise God. That is our purpose in life, to worship God and give Him glory. Honestly, I don't know

many people who, if asked, “What is the purpose of your life?” who would say, “To praise God” – but there it is straight from the Bible. That raises the question, “If we are not praising God, are we truly living as human beings? If human beings are created to worship God, are we making ourselves less than human if we chose not to worship Him?” God says even jackals and ostriches will one day honor Him. You would think it wouldn’t be that hard for human beings to honor and worship, especially those that call themselves Christians, but apparently it is for some people.

But I digress. The point is that we are created to worship God. Worship is all about God and not about us. Too often we try to make worship into a program, a cause, a show, or a lesson. We receive an offering in our worship services, but worship is not fundraising. Making an offering is an act of worship as we offer back to God what he first gave us. Making an offering is more about our need to give than it’s about God’s need to receive. God doesn’t really need anything.

Worship is also not education. Hopefully we might learn something from a sermon or the scripture readings. But worship is not a self-help program, we’re not here primarily to teach you about nutrition or do group counseling. We are here to experience God’s love, not to tell you how to vote or what detergent to use. And worship is not entertainment. We have beautiful music here, and I’ve been known to crack a joke or two occasionally, but we’re not here to tickle your funny bone or compete with the River City Brass Band. Music is an expression of our love for God, and while we offer the best we have, he loves whatever we offer as long as it is sincere.

We might say that worship has no practical value, like Mary anointing Jesus’ feet had no practical value. Worship doesn’t make us smarter or richer or healthier. It is just something we do for love, the love of God. Have you ever spent quiet time with a loved one? Have you ever played with a child, or put flowers on a grave? What practical value

do those things have? Not much. In a similar way worship is holy play, it's spending quality time with our Heavenly Father, it's a kind of remembering that makes the past, present and future one. Author Marva Dawn called worship "A royal waste of time," and that's exactly what it is: wasted time from an earthly perspective, but time well spent with His Royal Highness, the King of Heaven and Earth.

God loves us so much. Christ's presence is among us in Word and sacrament here, and he comes to us to spend time with us as he did with Mary and Martha and Lazarus. This Communion service is a dinner given in Jesus' honor where he is both Guest and Host. He feeds us his body and we drink his very blood. Nothing is more important than our time with Christ here. Nothing is of greater value. All else is rubbish compared to Jesus. Nothing is too good for him, and no sacrifice on our part is too great to make given what he sacrificed for us and for our salvation.

God calls us to worship Him generously, freely, and uninhibitedly, with our hearts, minds and bodies. How we can respond to the love Christ showed for us on the cross except by pouring out all we have on the altar? That is what we were created for, giving our all to God. Amen.