

April 3, 2022 - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent - A Reflection

Isaiah 43:26-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

The season of Lent was originally formed to be a kind of pilgrimage from our current situations through the Cross of Christ into the celebration of the Resurrection. Our pilgrimage with Christ continues alongside all of the other issues and struggles that are part of life on this planet at this time. Many things are clamouring for our attention and it sometimes seems overwhelming as to where we should put our focus. We journey with all of our fellow travelers and help where we can and receive help when we need it. When St. Paul wrote to the Christians who gathered in Philippi, during their pilgrimage, he tried to encourage them to be imitators of Christ and, in the section of the letter we heard today, points out some of the decisions with which he was faced as he attempted to imitate Christ. The section of scripture ends with a statement of the target toward which he was aiming, as he said, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. " (Phil. 3:14)<sup>c</sup>.

S. Lewis Bible: New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (p. 2329). HarperCollins Publishers. Kindle Edition. In order to be an imitator of Christ he regarded his family heritage as rubbish so he could to the call of Christ on his life and devote himself entirely to the project of being a disciple of Jesus. As I thought about this in preparation of this message I wondered what I might be asked to consider as rubbish in order to be an imitator of Jesus. I wonder how many of those things which are clamouring for my attention will help me imitate Christ and how many need to be ignored. The aim to 'press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus' is something to which I committed myself years ago and the daily renewal of that commitment faces me, and all other believers, with decisions about how best to imitate Christ in our unique situations. But how might we begin? Is there a good starting point for those who wish to take another step in this process of walking the pilgrim's road with Jesus? I suggest that we look at Mary in the Gospel passage assigned for today as one possible method of starting because in her actions we see an expression of love and that, it seems to me, is a good place to begin since we are called upon to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself.' So imitating Christ in showing love is something disciples can, and should, do.

How do you show someone how much you care? According to Dr. Gary Chapman, a Christian psychologist, there are basically 5 different ways of communicating love. One is by telling them in words, perhaps writing a poem or sharing a note. These words of affirmation are a language that communicates love and have been used by poets and song-writers for years and are one of the ways in which we even tell God how we love Him.

Another way we show someone how much we care is through physical touch. We have heard over and over again about how the inability to hug someone has been a source of great pain during the course of this pandemic. This physical method of communicating love has been discouraged in the midst of this pandemic and it has been a difficult struggle for many people. Of course we cannot physically hug God but by hugging each other we also communicate our love for God.

A third way we might communicate our love for someone is through acts of service. Offering to do something for someone without looking for anything in return is another language of love as identified by Dr. Chapman. We can also show God that we love him through acts of service toward those whom God loves.

A fourth way is through spending quality time with those we love. Quality time is time spent sharing our heart with someone else. Trusting the other person with the things we treasure is one way of communicating our love for that person and opening our hearts to God is certainly a way in which humanity is encouraged to show its love for its creator.

The final way that Dr. Chapman suggests that we can show love is through gifts and that is what we have displayed for us in today's reading from the Gospel. An extravagant act of devotion is performed by Mary who breaks open a jar of perfume which costs a year's wage in order to demonstrate to Jesus her love for him. As C. S. Lewis pointed out in a letter to a correspondent the important feature in the story for him was the breaking open of the jar. Breaking a jar is a one time action that cannot be undone and it may parallel the opening of our hearts to God's love. The pouring out of the contents of our hearts in an act of devotion to God is, according to scripture, a fragrant offering. Mary is remembered, and criticized, for this loving action and we are encouraged to acknowledge the goodness of the action and ignore the criticism.

These five love languages, Dr. Chapman explains in his various books, are ways we all communicate our love for each other but one of the languages will probably be our preferred method. It seems likely that giving gifts was one of Mary's preferred love languages. Other people may use a different form of communication but it is not helpful for us to criticize how another person communicates love. We may not understand the reasons for the motivation for a particular action so it is important to honour their action by accepting it as an action of love.

So, what is your preferred method of communicating love to someone? Are you drawn to using words or using actions? Is physical touch important or is the giving of gifts more to your liking? How about the kind of time you spend with others - does it have a 'life sharing' quality about it? We

are called upon to 'love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. We do so with whichever language of love is our natural tendency and so the way we communicate may well be different than the people around us. The important thing is to break our hearts open and allow the love within it to flow the way Mary's container of perfume was allowed to flow. Her actions were commended by Jesus and the perfume changed the atmosphere in the entire room. Our 'fragrant offering' of love will have the same sort of effect as evidenced by how the world is made better through the actions of love we witness. Do we not all feel the effect caused by an action of love done in our midst? Judas criticized the action, and we may be tempted to criticize the actions of love we see around us but Jesus commended the action and predicted that this story would be told as a source of encouragement and testimony for generations to come.

This portion of our Lenten pilgrimage is asking us to ponder how we communicate love to those in our lives, including our Creator. Perhaps as the week unfolds the Holy Spirit of God will help us grow in our understanding of this very important aspect of our relationships and prompt us to continually break open our hearts as an expression of our deep love of God and of our neighbours.

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