

First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA
Series: Sayings of Jesus – The Intimate Words
Sermon: “The Other Side of Following Jesus”
Text: Matthew 26:6-13 – The Anointing at Bethany
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It is an honor to share in your worship today by bringing something that I love to do. I love to preach and teach God’s Word. And I love to experience worship in the various settings that are offered here. This is a part of my Christian experience that I easily embrace along with studying the bible, being in Christian community and spiritual retreat.

But I can also speak of parts of the Christian experience that are not so enjoyable. I could tell stories of being shoved down a flight of stairs as a seventh grader by a boy who hated me because I was a Christian. I could tell about times that I felt very alone and rejected because of the Christian convictions that I held. I could tell about the pain I suffered in my body from a skin infection that took over a year to heal. And I could talk about the emptiness that I sometimes feel from not having all of the things that advertising says I can’t live without.

These are just as much a part of my Christian experience as those parts that I enjoy. But because they are so difficult, I need to be reminded of their validity. Because you and I live in a culture that tells us that we shouldn’t suffer and that we are entitled to a life of ease, we can feel that something is wrong with those who suffer. But since suffering is not only part of life in general, but especially critical to the life of the Christ-follower, Jesus is careful to use stories like the one in Matthew 26:6-13 to validate the struggles that you and I are facing today.

The story opens with sweet romance. The picture is of a woman (John 12 identifies her as Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus) who, out of love for Jesus, pours a bottle of very expensive perfume on the head or feet of Jesus. This is said to be a Hebrew wedding ritual that indicates that the bride and groom have consummated their marriage vows. Thus the action in this text have given secular authors fodder for entire books about how Jesus was married or involved sexually with women while he was on earth. And, so we expect (and possibly share in) the indignation of the disciples who are watching. Yet they are not so upset about the sexual connotations. What angers them is that this woman has wasted this precious bottle of perfume. Instead of pouring it on Jesus she could have sold it and given the money to the poor.

This reveals their view of what the Christian experience should be like – a purely one-dimensional view. Jesus doesn’t condemn their view – he doesn’t say that it is wrong to give to the poor. But he does seek to broaden their understanding of the life of faith. He says, “Leave her alone, she has done a beautiful thing. You will always get to take care of the poor, but I will not always be around.” And then here’s the place where he hopes to get their attention: “she did it to prepare me for burial.”

The importance of this last statement comes clearer when connected to its companion story at the end of the chapter where Peter denies Jesus three times. Three times, as Peter stands outside of the court where Jesus is being falsely accused, he denies that he knows Jesus and disassociates himself with his Lord. Now compare this to what might have happened if this woman were standing nearby. Jesus would have just walked by reeking of perfume (like a teenage boy who just discovered cologne only ten times worse); and anyone wondering if this woman were with Jesus would have simply needed to get a whiff of the very same perfume covering her.

When the woman anoints Jesus she is saying, ‘I want everyone to know that I’m with you. I want them to know this when we’re here reclining at the table and you are popular – the life of the party. But I also want them to know when you’re not popular – when you’re being betrayed, condemned, whipped and crucified. I will go with you in the fun times; but I will also go with you in the difficult times. Wherever you go I want them to know we’re together – that I am sharing your life.’

It can be easy to forget that suffering is a normal part of life, especially the Christian life. We can begin to believe that Jesus suffered so that we wouldn’t have to. Or that he brought about a great victory of healing for the world and that life should now be easy. But neither Jesus nor the New Testament writers ever say or imply such a thing. Instead we read that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33); that we should count it all joy when we fall into diverse trials and tribulations (James 1:2); that we are to be patient in affliction and rejoice in our suffering (Rom. 5:3, 12:12).

It can be difficult to embrace suffering with Jesus because our flesh wants to be comfortable and to be pampered. The popular voices in America would want us to believe that we are entitled to a life of ease and that there is something very wrong with those who struggle. It is difficult to embrace suffering with Jesus because those who suffer recognize their own frailty and lack of independence. Suffering threatens our present life and many Americans have so much that we don’t want to lose. Having seen others suffer, followers of Jesus can become afraid that if they suffer with Jesus they will not survive. Or worse yet, will be forced to live the remainder of their life in pain or depravity.

But when followers of Jesus suffer we pour out what is precious to us onto his feet. When we say ‘no’ to indulgence we anoint his feet. When we endure the financial hardship, especially because we’ve been honest and upright, we anoint his feet. When we struggle through the pain of losing a relationship or a personal tragedy we anoint his feet. When sickness cripples our body and we are forced to learn to live in new and dependant ways we anoint his feet. Embracing suffering in faith we say to Jesus, I will follow you even when it’s painful and difficult because I want your life to be my life.

I tried to develop some practical ways for us to apply this today because the metaphor can be so abstract. First, we need to immerse our imaginations in the stories of the cross of Jesus. They dominate the gospels and should dominate our minds. Along with *sola Scriptura*, Martin Luther and the Reformers also said *sola crucem theologia*

(the cross alone is our theology). This means if you really want to know what God is like and understand how to live like God then you must know the cross. Some Christians gloss over it one week a year or avoid it altogether because it is difficult. But you will find great comfort and the love of God in the stories of the cross.

Secondly, if you are one of those people who don't often suffer, for whom life is generally worry-free, you might try inviting suffering into your life through fasting. Try giving up lunch on Tuesday and Thursday, or missing all three meals one day each month. Or if you have special dietary needs that restrict fasting from food, try fasting from media – don't listen to the news for a week, stop reading for a week, don't watch television for a week, give up email for a week. Or give up speaking for one day. Fasting can be a voluntary way to invite suffering into our lives that heightens our awareness of our frailty and weakness.

You might also begin now preparing for Lent. Ask what your life might look like free of some habit or favorite thing. Listen to your life and to those around you and begin to make a plan now for two or three things you will give up for the forty days of Lent.

Consider finding someone who is suffering and coming along side them just to listen. Look for someone that you cannot fix because this person is going to serve you. You will be blessed hearing the wisdom they are gaining. These people will share with you how their relationship with God is changing for it is in suffering that our intimacy with Jesus grows deep.

And finally, if you are presently suffering, hear him say, “this one is doing a beautiful thing by not running away.” Enjoy the love of Jesus and know that he loves you in this the weakest moment of your life. He has been there before.

Soon our summer will be over and the fall will begin. I love living where we enjoy all four seasons. Our lives have seasons, too. While they are not as predictable the seasons are just as real. Enjoy whatever season you find yourself in today. Know that if you are in a fall or winter season, spring is coming. God promises that when we suffer the power of the resurrection is there to make all things new.

The Apostle Paul said, I want to know Christ – really know him . . . not only the power of the resurrection but the fellowship of sharing in his suffering and so to become like him in his death that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead (Phil. 3:10-11). This is what it takes to know Jesus and be his follower. How much do you want to know him? The degree to which you want to know Christ can be measured by what it takes to get you to stop following him. Find ways to anoint his head and feet this week.