

Visions of Jesus for Our Time (5): The Chosen One
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: John 12:1-8

Did you give up anything for Lent? A feature in the *Plain Dealer* recently indicated that this spiritual practice—once the tradition primarily of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches---has experienced something of a resurgence. People who were interviewed for the story told of giving up the usual items: alcohol, smoking, and sweets, but also mentioned were fast food, computer games, e-mailing. I read about a nine-year-old who told a young friend, "I'm giving up sarcasm for Lent. And it's really hard." A Fairmount member who wrote about this discipline in his Lenten meditation told me he thought he should practice what he preached (I wonder where he got that idea!), so he gave up red meat. One of my colleagues took a different approach by deciding to "take on" a new practice --and has made a conscious effort to view each person she encounters as a beloved child of God—to very positive effect, particularly in difficult situations. I *thought* that I had not given up anything this year, until the Indians baseball schedule came out with the home opener on GOOD FRIDAY! Sigh.

Whether giving up something or taking on a new responsibility, the idea is to use the roughly six week period as an opportunity for spiritual growth; to be intentional about cultivating faith and making time and space to allow God to work in one's own life and soul. I commend such Lenten practices to all of us. Not unlike a physical work-out being an important component to a healthy body, so disciplined action and mindfulness are required for a resilient, joyful spirit. We move at such a hectic pace that it's easy to ignore our true spiritual condition. I suppose the six-week timing is arbitrary, but for Christians, the heart of our religion can be found in Jesus' death and resurrection and the events leading

up to them. The vision of Jesus we're particularly considering today concerns his death, the reasons for it, and what effect it has toward our restored relationship with God. To put it another way, we will explore what it means to say that Jesus died for our sins.

The morning gospel reading precedes by one day the "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem we will remember next week on Palm Sunday. Jesus' actions and teaching has incurred both the attention of Rome and the wrath of the religious leaders. There's been talk of a plot to put him to death, to silence him once and for all. Now the Passover is upon them—the holiest festival of the year, and Jesus has declared his intention to observe it in the capital city. He's not naïve; he knows the risks that await him there. He goes there on purpose. Scripture tells us he "set his face" and headed toward Jerusalem.

On his way, he stops in nearby Bethany, to visit his friends, sisters Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. During dinner, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with fragrant and expensive oil. The gospels of Matthew and Mark tell a similar incident, but only in John is the woman identified as Mary of Bethany. Jesus immediately connects Mary's loving anointment of him with his impending death and the preparation of a body for burial. He also uses the same word that meant the ritual act of identifying the person God chose for a particular task— anointing the king, for example. Did Jesus know? Did he see his death as the pinnacle of God's plan to redeem sinful humanity? And what does that mean for our own understanding of the crucified one? Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the 12th chapter, at the first verse. [JOHN 12:1-8; p. 106 New Testament, chapel/pew Bibles]

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. The biblical insight is inspiring and idealistic. It comes to mind when we hear about persons who have made enormous sacrifices—maybe even the ultimate sacrifice—on

behalf of others. Martyrs of the faith who accepted death rather than deny their Lord. Soldiers who put themselves in harm's way to defend their country. Mission workers who endure hardship and danger to share the good news in remote places. Organ donors. Firefighters. Parents. We can all think of examples of great love, love that goes the distance, that counters instinctual self-preservation with a willingness to sacrifice even life for the beloved. We are inspired by their witness; we may be filled with gratitude; we may become better persons because of their self-giving love. But we don't say that their death saves the whole world, the way we do of Jesus' death.

What's the difference? What is unique about Jesus' death – even in comparison with others who die for a righteous cause?

Here's how the argument typically goes: We have all sinned against God and are guilty. Jesus' mission to a fallen world was to serve as the perfect sacrifice to atone for its sin. God, being perfect, could only forgive through a perfect offering—animal sacrifice such as was practiced in ancient Judaism wouldn't be adequate, nor could the sacrifice of an imperfect human. God sent Jesus to be that perfect sacrifice. Jesus submitted to God's will and accepted the suffering and shame of the cross. God is satisfied; his perfect justice served; sinful humanity is at last reconciled to its creator. In the cross we see the breadth and depth of God's love for us. Do you recognize this interpretation of what it means to say Jesus died for our sins?

One can certainly find elements of this theory in scripture, though this way of understanding Jesus' death did not fully develop until about nine hundred years ago. But it has dominated Christian theology ever since, and in fact for some, provides the litmus test of Christian orthodoxy. The problem with this view is that it pretty much negates the notion of grace. If Jesus' death is viewed as an acceptable payment of a debt owed to God, then the balance sheet comes out even. God's love, though universal, isn't all that amazing after all.

The scales of divine justice are balanced, even given the sacrificial cost. Furthermore, if Jesus' death was a necessary part of God's plan, it's hard not to see it as abuse, the device of an avenging deity who demands blood sacrifice to appease His wrath and disappointment at the fallen creation. The vision of passive sufferer --the lamb before slaughter-- reinforces rather than resists a pattern of violence wielded by the powerful over the powerless--known all too well among the people of earth, for whom it has had such destructive effect.

There is another way to understand the cross as the central symbol of Christian faith. It means paying attention to Jesus' whole life and ministry, and his assertion that "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly." That life—and its reality in the kingdom of God—is God's will for the world, and for that Jesus lived and died. We cannot forget that Jesus didn't die of disease or old age; he was condemned by the religious authorities and executed by the ruling political powers. Surely he would never have been a threat if his ministry had simply been about feeding the hungry and curing the sick. Instead he proclaimed a kingdom of peace and abundance in which all people thrive. He rejected all offers of power that depended upon the oppression of others, and in fact called the powerful to reject such actions. He accepted the consequences of standing with those who were deemed unworthy of God's love and acceptance. Jesus allowed nothing—not even the prospect of suffering—to dissuade him from God's will to bring life to the world God so loved.

The cross then becomes a paradoxical image: symbol of death, but also of restoration. Jesus willingly goes to the cross, as the consequence of human sin in which we all have a part, and transforms it. He became sin for us, not to appease God, but to change us. We are confronted at the cross by a reality we cannot deny. Perhaps it is only there that we see how terribly skewed our lives and communities are from God's intent for them. Only as we consider the goodness of creation, the divine image stamped upon each human heart—alongside the brokenness of violence and warfare, poverty and greed,

disease and hatred, waste and pollution—can we admit our need for God. Salvation begins in our recognition of two things: first, that we are complicit in this brokenness, and thus in Jesus' death; and second, that we can't fix it.

But God can. And God has, in the life, death, and resurrection of his chosen one, Jesus the Christ. Jesus entered into the very worst of human life and mended it, experienced death and hell and released us from their stranglehold, and rules with God, working even now to complete the salvation of the whole creation. God judges us, oh yes, but the judgment is mediated through grace. The good news is that while we are deserving of God's condemnation, God does not condemn. Instead, God has so loved the world that God has given the Son for its life.

In Jesus' death, we find grace. The cross is there to say it is not "cheap grace." Though resurrection is the Christian's hope, it is not the state of the world in which we live. Jesus went the distance to bring us life, and Jesus' followers must be ready to do the same in his name.

Okay, we might not be ready to stare Satan down. But I keep thinking of that nine-year-old giving up sarcasm for Lent. I imagine she knew something of the thrill of making a great, sarcastic response that drew laughter and admiration from others. And I wonder if her Lenten practice has taught her something about sacrifice, about the transformation that takes place when one intentionally resists even a small, destructive force in favor of a better way. *[Stephanie Paulsell related this anecdote in her article "A Small Beautiful Thing" in The Christian Century, March 20, 2007]*

When Mary poured out the costly ointment onto Jesus' feet, the Bible offers a small but significant detail, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Friends, Jesus' death fills the church and the world with the transforming power of unconditional love and amazing grace. God and humanity, once separated, are reconciled, our relationship restored. As we draw to the end of this Lenten season, as the shadow of the

cross looms before us, now is the time to ask, what have I got to lose? What cross shall I take up? May our answers to those questions be a fragrant offering of ourselves, gifts of life made possible by God's great gift of life to us.

TO JESUS CHRIST WHO LOVES US AND FREED US FROM OUR SINS AND MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM, TO HIM BE GLORY AND POWER FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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