

At the 10:30 am service on March 21, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Psalm 126; John 12:1-8.

### **“Killjoy”**

This is the last Sunday before Holy Week. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday which includes the Passion because some people in worship will not be able to make the Good Friday service. The church at large doesn't want people to jump from Palm Sunday to Easter because the road to Easter passes through the cross of Good Friday and the Good Friday service makes that happen in a significant liturgical way.

Liturgically we are getting close to the cross and Jesus' death. The scripture passage today is exceptionally fitting as we reflect on the death of Jesus. It's a simple setting.

A week before Jesus' death Jesus and his disciples arrive at the home of Lazarus who Jesus had raised from the dead. One commentator says Jesus resuscitated him. However one looks at it, Jesus performed what was perceived as a miracle. He brought a “dead” person back to life.

Pastorally, he's now doing a follow-up visit. Lazarus and siblings are totally excited that Jesus is there. They provide dinner. Lazarus sits with Jesus, Martha serves and Mary brings a pound of expensive perfume and anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair.

The ointment was intended for Jesus' burial but Mary uses it here to demonstrate her love and devotion to Jesus. The house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume. It's a beautiful and sweet time: a nice meal, good friends, an amazing gift of kindness from Mary and a lovely fragrance. Everyone is enjoying themselves.

Then like a bolt out of the blue comes the killjoy: Judas. The section on Judas in this passage is fascinating. It's a small but very powerful paragraph. They say that dynamite comes in small packages. This is dynamite. The writer John packs it in. We have the context: Everyone is having fun then out of the blue booms the word “but!” If anything contributes to Jesus' death, this is it: Judas quoted by John and John's parentheses.

John writes and listen how damning it is: **“But** Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples [then in parenthesis] (the one who was about to betray him), said, ‘Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?’ [again in parenthesis] (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.)”

You can imagine Judas sulking in the corner, not so much concerned about the poor, but seeing this perceived waste and thinking the money used to buy the perfume could be in his purse and if he had it he would embezzle it. Money, money, money.

The insidious thing is his lie about his intentions. John knew that he wasn't really concerned for the poor. He cynically used this high and mighty remark to look good. I'm sorry if I'm too harsh with Judas. I'm making the point which I think John is making that it

is this kind of person that causes so much havoc in the world. Judas' betrayal was a major contributor to Jesus' death.

The portrait given here is that Judas is a betrayer, a liar and a thief. Jesus characterized this person as the evil one earlier in his ministry. He said the thief comes to steal, kill and destroy but I came that you may have life and have it in all its fullness. Judas is that thief.

Killjoy is apt. Not only does he kill the joy of the party but he will also kill the joy embodied in Jesus. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit which was personified in Jesus. He will remove Jesus from the planet and deprive his family and friends of this joy. It's a sad thing when someone takes away our joy physically and spiritually.

That's the cross: it's the crucifixion of the one who came to bring life and it's the death of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, generosity and self-control – the fruit of the Spirit.

We now see the darkness and power of this small paragraph on Judas. By the way, some people think that Judas was set up against his will to have Jesus killed. They say it aligns with the purpose of God. Someone had to betray Jesus in order for Jesus to die and rise again. Judas was that person.

I disagree with this theory. God does not contribute to death, ours or anybody, including Jesus. In Deuteronomy God says I place before you life and death and then encourages: "Choose life." For some reason – and scholars have speculated on this – Judas chooses death. He chose to betray Jesus by handing him over to those who killed him.

Every human being is faced with choices. We are born blessed, we are wounded by a world that is often unjust and unwelcoming (according to Mathew Fox), and we recover and work on being the best persons we can. Our relationship to God in Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit helps us on our way.

One would think that Judas who had just spent three years with Jesus would be well on his way to living a caring, clean and integrated life. He had not dealt with the wounds of his life. In that way we can be compassionate towards him while not condoning his actions. We know too that we have been there and have the same temptations.

After Judas' killjoy statement Jesus is cool as a cucumber. He says: "Leave her alone. She bought it (the ointment) so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

All the gospels tell this story of anointing – in various ways. In every case (except Luke) the story portrays Jesus as being anointed for burial and clearly prefigures his death. This might be a looking back at the story in the light of his death. In any case, Jesus justifies the expense on the basis that it was spent for burial which is costly. Jesus has a sense that he will not be long in the world just as Martin Luther King Jr. had a sense in his "I have a dream" speech.

Jesus then says a statement about the poor which the church has used to both justify and to condemn complacency toward the needs of the poor. Jesus clearly is not counseling neglect of the poor. He is quoting Deuteronomy 15:11, whose message is unmistakable: "For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand...to the needy and to the poor, in the land" (RSV).<sup>1</sup>

Jesus concludes with the words: "...but you do not always have me." We return to where we began: with a prelude to the passion. Jesus senses that his death is around the corner.

"Mary's act came and comes in the midst of treachery and betrayal in the world and among Jesus' followers.

"We live our lives in the shadow of the cross, but we also live in the presence of the risen Christ. So here is an invitation to walk with Jesus in extravagant acts of compassion and generosity in a world whose violence and cruelty crucify people every day."<sup>2</sup> So we move on towards the cross. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Stephen Shoemaker in *Feasting on the Word*, Bartlett and Taylor eds., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Ibid