

Unreasonable love

John 12:1-8

March 21, 2010

It's a shame, isn't it, that Jesus had to die so soon, so young?

By all reports, he was still a vigorous young man, commanding unprecedented attention with his compelling message and his healing touch. His popularity among the people was only growing and he was beginning to convince many of them that history, their history, was on the brink of something extraordinary. He was winning hearts and minds, filling people long downtrodden with hope and turning their hearts once more to God. They pinned their hopes on him, and then, so suddenly, he was taken from them.

Think of what he could have done, if he only had more time! Think of whom he could have saved, if he only had more time! There were so many in Israel still unhealed, untaught, unforgiven, unliberated.

With more time, he might have prepared them for the suffering to come, for the terrors they would endure at the hands of Rome. He might have been able to make them strong enough -- spiritually strong enough -- to resist Rome and rid themselves of that oppressive yoke. Maybe, with more time, he might even have won over the Pharisees, convincing them by his unwavering goodness that he indeed came as a messenger from God.

But he was taken away from them all, put to death at the prime of his life, the task of continuing his work left to a handful of his followers. But these followers, his disciples, were so raw, so dull, so slow to get it, so unprepared! Think of what he could have done with more time to prepare them, more time to make sure his work would be ably administered after he was gone.

He has had such a profound impact on our world, on the course of human history, even after so brief a ministry of, maybe, three years. Think of what good he could have done with more time! Think of what good he could have done if he had more time to elaborate and clarify his message, maybe even to write down his thoughts himself, instead of leaving his legacy to the memories and interpretations of his followers.

But he was taken from the world, taken from us, all too soon. The end of his life simply proved true what has always been true, that the powerful and connected get their way, the bad guys win. He is remembered as a martyr to his cause, but what if he had lived? What if he had time to really change the world? How might we have remembered him then? How might our world be different today?

He should have stayed away from Jerusalem. He should have changed his mind and set aside his determination to go there, to walk into that hornet's nest. It would have been a reasonable thing to do.

Of all the forces that threatened to keep Jesus from completing his journey to Jerusalem, this may have been the most potent. We have already talked about a number of other threats ...

There was the threat of fear, hearing the news that powerful King Herod was out to get him. That might have convinced Jesus not to continue his journey to Jerusalem, to seek a safe refuge instead, but Jesus did not let fear change his behavior or turn him aside from his mission.

There was the threat of despair, seeing all around him dull minds and hard hearts and unmoved spirits. Jesus might have given up, decided it wasn't worth it, but he chose never to give up, to keep on keeping on, leaving the results in God's hands, giving grace a chance.

There was the threat of the grumblers, taking all the fun and energy out of it, monopolizing Jesus' time and attention and diverting him from those who needed him. But Jesus reminded them of joy, of God's joy over every sinner who repents, over every lost soul who comes back home.

Each of these threats, as powerful as they were, Jesus resisted. But each of these came at Jesus from the outside, external forces trying to intimidate him or discourage him or dissuade him. But this latest threat, the threat more powerful than the rest, came at Jesus from the inside, from the inner circle of his closest friends, perhaps even from within Jesus himself. It was this: *Be reasonable! Don't do anything rash or ill-advised! Think it through! Use your common sense! Be reasonable!*

It happened in Bethany, at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Jesus was there having dinner with these dear friends. It was just six days before Passover, just six days before his arrest and trial and execution. Lazarus was sitting at the table with him, Martha was helping to serve the meal (of course, Martha was serving!), and Mary ...

Mary took a jar of perfume, a most expensive perfume from the Far East, and used it to wash his feet, drying his feet with her hair. It must have been a startling picture: her self-effacing display of affection, she lavishly pouring out the entire bottle of perfume so that the whole house was filled with the sweet scent.

Judas was scandalized!

Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?

It's a good question: the perfume was worth almost a year's salary for a field worker, probably \$10,000-15,000 in our currency. Think of all the good the disciples might have done with that money! Really!

The gospel writer suggests an ulterior motive for Judas' objection, claiming he said that only because he would have liked to get his hands on the money, but let's give Judas the benefit of the doubt. It is a good question! It is reasonable, isn't it, to argue that the money could have been put to good use, that Mary's extravagant display is a terrible waste of a valuable resource, that it ignores the clear moral imperative of the gospel to bring good news to the poor? Isn't it reasonable to expect Jesus to scold Mary for her unnecessarily indulgent act and to remind her, to remind all of them, of their common duty to serve their neighbors with all they have?

But Jesus does not scold her. He commends her, without hesitation.

Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has for the day of my burial.

You can tell what Jesus has on his mind. He is just days from entering the city of Jerusalem, just days from the certain fate that awaits him there. In Jesus' mind, Judas' comment raises questions not only about Mary's choices, but also about Jesus' choices, about what will become of him and his message and his work because of those choices.

We need to preserve our precious resources and use them well! It's not time yet to throw it all away! It's not time yet to resign ourselves to defeat! It's not time yet to say goodbye! We have more to do!

It must have raised doubts in Jesus' own mind, or stirred doubts that were already there.

What will I accomplish by going to Jerusalem? What will I accomplish by going through with all this? Might there not be a better way, a more productive way, a more reasonable way, to do what God has called me to do?

Such doubts must have filled Jesus' mind, but he answered Judas without hesitation.

You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me.

Jesus sets his mind on completing his journey, on seeing it through, on giving himself away in love, as unreasonable as it may seem. He knows he has little time left, and he accepts Mary's gesture for what it is -- a generous gift of her affection and devotion.

Let her be! You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me.

It is unconscionable the ways these words of Jesus have been misquoted and pulled out of context to justify insensitivity and apathy. In no way does Jesus mean it makes little sense to try to help the poor because there will always be poor people around no matter what you do. On the contrary, he says they will have ample time and opportunity to serve the poor, as they should, but, in that moment, they have little time and opportunity left with him.

Time and opportunity ... That's the message. They will have -- we will have -- time and opportunity to love and serve neighbors, especially poor neighbors, near and far. That is what God wants from us. That is Jesus' desire for us. That is our Christian duty. That is our human duty.

But Mary shows us by her example, and Jesus reminds us by his response, that what God wants from us, first and above all else, is not duty, but love. Unbounded love! Extravagant love! Unreasonable love! Love like Jesus' love!

In that moment, all that mattered to Mary was offering to Jesus in some tangible, personal, intimate way some sign of the depth of her devotion and gratitude and humility. She gave -- not just an extravagant gift -- but herself, holding nothing back, pouring it all out, pouring herself all out, in whole-hearted, fully-surrendered, beyond the boundaries, impractical, unreasonable, holy love!

What about you? Is your faith all about duty? Or is it about love? Are you ready to be equally unreasonable? Or will the counsel of reasonable people turn you away from following Jesus?