

“Celebration of Life”

Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent and next week is already Palm Sunday. The lectionary reading on the fifth Sunday of Lent, every year, focuses on death being overcome, and it is always from John’s gospel.

Jesus and his disciples were invited to a house of his close friends, whom we might even call disciples, Martha, Mary and Lazarus, sisters and brother, who lived in Bethany. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, which was written about in the previous chapter.

It was six days before Passover. Mary took a generous amount of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. If you attended the workshop, “12 Oils of the Bible,” over a week ago, the oil was called spikenard. It is costly oil derived from the dried roots and stems of the nard, an herb from Asia and was used as a perfume and a medicine.

Mary knelt down before Jesus, poured the oil on his feet and wiped them dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the oil. Judas Iscariot complained that Mary was wasting the oil, which was worth over 300 denarii, a year’s wages, which could be sold to help the poor.

Though it sounds like a plausible argument, the gospel states that he said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.

Jesus responded to Judas. “You will always have the poor among you and constant opportunities to act lavishly toward them; but you won’t always have me.”

Why did Mary pour such expensive oil over Jesus? Was it out of her gratitude to Jesus for raising her brother, Lazarus, from the tomb and for giving him back to her and her sister, Martha? Probably “Yes,” and it was most likely to have been her expression of her total love and devotion to her teacher, Jesus.

Jesus, who was aware of his impending death on the cross, took her action as a preparation for his burial. “This perfume,” said Jesus, “was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it.”

By anointing his feet with the expensive oil, Mary offered him her appreciation for “life” given by Jesus and her love and devotion to him. That aroma of love and life permeated the house – a celebration of life and love.

In today’s First Lesson, Apostle Paul celebrates the life Christ offers to us. First he listed all he was proud of formerly as his own religious pedigree. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a favorite of the twelve tribes. He observed the Law. He was a Pharisee, sometimes more concerned with the legalistic aspect of the Jews’ relationship with God.

This all changed, however, when he met Christ. He laid his pedigree aside for the value of knowing Christ Jesus. All else, all past accomplishments

and failures are, as the King James version accurately translated the Greek word “skubala,” “dung.”

Dung is not worthless if we are a farmer, then or now, right? Dung is what remains of food. It can no longer nourish us directly, but it can and does nourish the earth to generate more food for humans and animals alike. As such, dung is not an energy source. It is a catalyst. The energy sources for plant life are sunlight and water.

Likewise, our true energy source, which will not perish, is Christ -- Living Water, Light of the World, Bread from Heaven, the Vine. As we encounter Christ and become witnesses to the life that is in Jesus, in all its fullness, then we are truly energized and can celebrate life again and again against any form of death in the world that crushes us.

If we have had our own pedigree of some sort, I hope, as Paul did, that we have all had golden moments of laying aside our pride and righteousness or accomplishments in order to be close to Christ and celebrate the life Christ offers to us.

So as Mary of Bethany and Apostle Paul celebrated new life in Christ, may we look for life, choose life over death, and celebrate life in the world shadowed by death.

The birth of a baby is a celebration of life.

Being thankful for spring is a celebration of life.

Choosing to mend relationships is choosing life over death.

To seek for healing is to choose life over death.

To find something we can be thankful for in our dark days is to choose life over death.

To help those who are in need is to offer life and to choose life.

To release our future to Christ, the source of life, is to choose life

Let us continue to look for life, choose life and celebrate it as Christ offers it to us.

Brothers and sisters, let us be encouraged by the words of Apostle Paul.

“It’s not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don’t think I’ve reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus.” (v. 12-14)

Amen.