

Play-by-Play Commentary

John 12:1-8, 20-33

Fifth Sunday in Lent, (March 21) 2021

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How could the Eternal do a temporal act,

The Infinite become a finite fact?

Nothing can save us that is possible.

- W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being*

Have you ever gone to a movie and someone sits behind you making a kind of play-by-play commentary on everything going on in the movie? You know what I mean? You've just settled into your seat and the previews are starting. Several people rustle in behind you and also settle in. Soon, however, the play-by-play begins, "Omigosh, I'm so going to see that movie! George Clooney is so hot; I love him." Next preview: "She's terrible. Boring. And she can't act either." Then the movie starts, and the commentary continues, and you discover to your horror that the person doing all the talking behind you has previously seen the movie. "Did you see that? Watch how he looks at her. They're so going to fall in love later." Now by this time, knowing the kind of movie you were watching, you could have guessed that the leading man and woman were going to fall for each other, but you prefer to let it unfold on its own, without the commentary from row behind you. Then, sure enough, you hear something like, "Uh, oh! Did you see how he always pulls on his ear? That's the key in how the cops will catch him at the end."

With one sentence, all the dramatic tension is gone, and you want to toss your popcorn on the person behind you.

Put that in the back of your mind while we look at this story as told by John. This is the story of the anointing of Jesus as he moves closer to the cross. All four Gospels remember this story. Luke places it earlier in the ministry of Jesus while the other three place it in his last few days. Matthew, Mark, and John agree that it takes place in Bethany, a small village just a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark say it happened at the house of Simon the leper, while Luke says that Jesus was invited to eat at the home of a Pharisee. Only John identifies the woman by name while Luke is the one which puts the most emphasis on her being a sinner, the scandal of her anointing Jesus' feet, and the forgiveness of her by Jesus. Matthew and Mark say the woman anointed Jesus' head – a symbol of kingship, while Luke and John say it was Jesus' feet that were anointed – a symbol of his preparation for death.

But listen carefully to John's version and how he tells us what happened. Remember, back in chapter 11, Lazarus has been raised from the dead. So here in chapter 12, Jesus is in Bethany, at the home of his best friends, sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. They are giving a dinner for Jesus, and sure enough, true to character Martha is cooking and serving, while Lazarus is sitting at the table with Jesus. Mary comes in with a pound of costly perfumed ointment and anoints Jesus' feet, then wipes them with her hair, and John adds, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

John next tells us that Judas was there, and then, like the person in the theater who was providing play-by-play commentary, John starts making whispered asides. Already John has told us, "Look, there's Lazarus! He was raised

from the dead in the previous movie.” Then he hisses, “Hey, keep your eye on that guy Judas! He’s about to betray Jesus!” And, when Judas complains of the cost of the wasted perfume and how they could have sold it and given the money to the poor, John adds, “Don’t believe a word of that caring-for-the-poor stuff. Judas is really a thief!”

Then further into the same chapter Jesus enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and then teaches crowds of people gathering around him. He is highly aware that things are reaching a climax with the ruling powers and he talks about his soul is troubled. He is aware of the looming cross. John tells us that a voice spoke from heaven glorifying God, but all the crowd heard was interpreted as thunder or maybe an angel. Finally, Jesus says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” And John adds, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die” (12:33).

What is going on here? Can’t John just allow the story to unfold on its own? Do we really need this voice behind us constantly spilling the beans on the plot?

In the case of John, this tendency to give whispered asides is not a quirk, but rather a profound mark of John’s theology. John is doing this on purpose and trying to show us something important. John is convinced that life is double plotted, that there is a lot more going on here than just what you see with your eyes. There is another plot going on and he wants to make sure that we don’t miss it. In John, ordinary events unfold around us but hidden among the ordinary and the mundane are signs of the eternal. The wine is in the water, the light in the darkness, the Word in the flesh. Jesus talks about bread, but it is not just bread, Jesus is also the bread of life. When Jesus talks about water, it is the living water. And every time Jesus mentions “I am” as in “I am the bread of life” or “I am living

water” it also means that Jesus is the great “I am.” Which is the same “I am” said by God in the burning bush way back in Exodus 3 when God speaks to Moses. For John, belief is the capacity to see not only life’s surfaces but also its holy depths, to be able to look at events unfolding around us but also to look through them, above them and beneath them to perceive what is truly happening.

John’s Gospel functions like what the Eastern Orthodox call an icon. An icon is a painting, unusually dimensionally flat. But for the Eastern Church, an icon is not simply a painting of Jesus or someone from the Bible or a saint from Christian history. Its significance is that it is a window through which we learn to look and see something of the eternal. The Eastern Church trains Christians to gaze upon icons and meditate and pray in such a way to see through it; to gaze upon what is truly happening in its holy depths. An icon is much more than simply a painting. And with the Gospel according to John there is much more going on here than just the surface story.

Let me give you another example from our own life together and explain why it is so important for us to have our new online cooking show, *Feed My Sheep*. Think about how much of the entire Bible involves eating -- from the beginning with Adam and Eve becoming hungry to the very end with all of redeemed and united heaven and earth sharing the great messianic banquet in the Book of Revelation. Good and bad choices are made over food, whether it’s a bowl of porridge or a great banquet. It is by eating the Passover Seder that the Hebrew people remember God’s deliverance from bondage in the Exodus. The children of Israel are fed and sustained for their forty-year sojourn through the wilderness by God’s gift of manna. One of the marks of the prophet Elijah is that he not only is fed by God, he also is a conduit by which God feeds others. Daniel and his three friends eat their kosher meals instead of the food of the Empire. In the New

Testament, Jesus' first temptation in the wilderness is about eating. He performs his first miracle at a wedding reception and meal, feeds thousands of people, has a meal with his best friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, shares a last meal with his disciples so they will remember and reenact his life of sacrificial and suffering servanthood. After the resurrection, he eats breakfast with the disciples and on another occasion, he is revealed to two traveling disciples after they've been walking down the road, as he breaks bread with them. In Acts, the first squabble of the young church is over the Gentile widows being left out of the distribution of bread.

Eating and sharing meals is central in the Bible. And it doesn't take much reading and reflection to figure out that there is much more going on in these Bible stories than simply another depiction of folks receiving fuel for their material bodies. Sharing meals has to do with communion with God and it doesn't matter if it is Holy Communion or a Pot-Luck supper, food is a gift of God and in sharing it and eating it we are participating in God. It is why we learn at the earliest of ages to "say grace" over our meals – to thank God and to remind ourselves that eating is a means of knowing God. We eat because we are hungry, but we also eat because our deepest and truest hunger is for the giver of this blessed food. And when we eat together, when we share food, God knits us together with him and with one another.

When we eat simply to assuage our appetite, we end up eating food for its own end and not as a means to know God. When we eat without God, and food for its own end, then we are simply repeating the original sin of Adam and Eve.

So, you see, it's never just Susan's guacamole or Jane's bread pudding or Steve's brisket.

And all this is true of all of life. All life is a gift from God. We are surrounded by God and the gifts of God. This material world that we see and feel is also fraught full of the spiritual and the eternal. The biblical understanding is that all of creation is whole, both spiritual and material. The sin is when we separate them and when we try to live with one without the other. The theologian Karl Barth said that we humans are both “ensouled bodies” and “embodied souls.” Both. One.

It’s never just guacamole or bread pudding. And it’s never just greens that Cindy and Bryan Pruitt grow on Appleby Community Farm. I had a fellow pat a tree one time and tell me that the tree is just a tree and that’s all. I’m saying this morning it’s never just a tree in just the woods any more than our children are just little kids. And looking ahead, it is why when we once again greet one another, “The Lord be with you,” there will be more going on than simply shaking hands. There is a double plot going on.

Hopkins said, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” It is never just the world.

And this is what John is telling us. It is why John gives us a play-by-play commentary.

It is why we need two soundtracks, two plots -- one to tell the story and the other to tell God’s deepest truth about the story. John wants us to go to this ordinary dinner party in Bethany, but not to miss the hint of resurrection we can see in Lazarus. He wants us to hear Judas’s pious speech about caring for the poor but also to discern in those words the treachery that lies in the human heart. He wants us to see Mary not just as hostess but as prophet. He wants us to see her

anointing of Jesus not as a mere impulse of indulgence, but as a costly act of worship. Jesus is not merely eating and drinking with friends -- he is the lamb at the Passover feast, and John wants us to smell the fragrance of the perfume that fills the house as the aroma of holy death. John whispers between the lines of the story because he wants us to see what is truly happening, and to believe. And he wants us to look around at our own lives and the sacredness of them and give thanks. And he wants us to see the foreshadowing of the coming cross and Jesus' costly sacrifice and begin to grasp that God is at work on many levels. Jesus will be lifted up and die on a cross – but it's not just a cross.

Betty Kyle's father, Joe Kyle, died this week. He was 93 years of age and had taught his Sunday School class at First Christian Church in Carthage for 60 years, right up to four weeks before he died. In the hospital room not long before he died, Betty told me – and I tell this with her permission – her father was hurting and telling Betty how much he hurt. He asked, “Why do I hurt so much? Why the pain?” Betty responded, “Dad, remember you always say “That every big change, and every big transition is accompanied by pain. Just before birth there is great pain. And Dad, you are hurting because you are being transformed. You are going through transition to a new birth.” Once more both Betty and her father knew exactly what she was saying. When Betty and her father talked, that hospital room was not just an ordinary hospital room. And his pain was no longer pain because of his physical body failing. This was no ordinary dying. There was more going on. It was a sacred dying, with him moving toward God.

Tom Long tells of going back to a church where years before he had served as a student pastor. After the service, he struck up a conversation with a woman whom he had not seen in many years. “How is your dad?” he asked. “I remember him as one of my favorite people.”

“I lost my dad last summer” she said sadly. “Cancer. But he lived a long and good life,” she added, “and in many ways he died a peaceful death. The last few moments of his life were amazing.

“My sister, my brother and I were with him when he died. He had a stroke a few days before and lost his speech. You can imagine how hard that was on my father.”

“Yes,” Tom nodded. “Your father loved to talk, loved to tell a good story.”

“About an hour before he died, he began a hard struggle. He was using this last bit of energy to try to speak. He seemed to have something he really wanted to communicate. It was terribly frustrating for him and painful to watch. Finally, he pointed at my brother and motioned toward the sink in his room. My sister said, ‘He wants some water,’ and my brother went to the sink and poured a glass. He brought it over to my father, but Dad refused it and made a gesture toward my brother as if to say, ‘No, you drink it.’ My brother hesitated for a moment and then took a sip from the glass. My father then motioned with his hand, as if to say, ‘Pass it to your sister.’ My brother handed me the glass, and my father repeated the gesture.

“It was then that it dawned on my sister. ‘He’s serving communion,’ she said quietly.”

Through these gestures, her father communicated that this was no ordinary glass of water in an ordinary hospital room. There was more going on here. This was Holy Communion, and this hospital room was a chapel; this was no ordinary dying, but a sacred and faithful death.

In an even deeper way, Mary's anointing made the house at Bethany into a sanctuary and transformed that meal into a Eucharist "showing forth the Lord's death until he comes." The whole world is now filled with the fragrance of that perfume. And when Jesus is lifted up and nailed to that Roman cross, the ruler of darkness was defeated, while all of us are drawn to his embracing arms.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.