

Gratitude as Resistance

John 12:1-8

Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 24) 2024

The Reign of Christ

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Psalm 137 was written in exile,

*By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

(Ps. 137:1-4)

These days, we're asking this a lot. We are living in a land that we're discovering is stranger than we thought, where there is more fear and resentment than we realized. Where racism, bigotry, and suspicion are pervasive, where despair, and a lack of hope, is rampant, where it seems that meanness is on the rise, White Christian Nationalism is taking over our schools, and a land where we've elected a government committed to all these things.

I'm here to tell you that yes, we must sing songs of the Lord while in a strange land. But I'm also here to tell you that sometimes, perhaps most of the

time, we sing the blues. We sing spirituals and gospel songs we've learned from our sisters and brothers in the Black church. Folks who have known for 400 years "the world is not right, but God is still on his throne."

Let me hear it again! The world is not right, but God is still ... [*on his throne*]!

On this The Reign of Christ Sunday, we can sing songs of joy and hope because God is still on his throne. These are songs of Resurrection joy and hope, but they are also songs that have been through the grief and pain of the Cross – the blues.

Singing the Lord's song in a strange land is part of how we survive and thrive. To put it differently, it is how we remain human.

In 1978, I heard theologian William Stringfellow do a lecture at Baylor in the Tidwell Bible Building where I spent a lot of time. The main thing I remember is that he chained smoked cigarettes in the Tidwell Bible Building! Unbelievable! The second thing I remember is that he said the vocation, the calling of Christians is to resist the Powers of Death and Domination. Five years later, I heard him at Vanderbilt at a joint symposium of the Law and Divinity schools. Again, he chained smoked cigarettes and said, "The vocation of the Christian is to resist the Powers of Death and Domination."

We're living in a land where Death and Domination rule. Our calling is to resist. Being human is resistance. Singing the blues and singing joy and hope is resistance. Walking alongside others on their pilgrimage from another country is resistance. And this morning, I want to remind us that practicing gratitude is resistance.

In our reading from John 12 this morning, Lazarus has been resurrected from the dead by Jesus in the chapter just before. After the funeral, and after the resurrection, Jesus and the disciples all go to the home of the siblings Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. There is plenty of food – all the food brought for the funeral is there, but instead of grieving Lazarus’s death, they are all celebrating his life.

But – and you know there is always a “but.” But those with power don’t like it. Those with the power believe in order, stability, and control, and nothing upsets the applecart like an unexpected resurrection. Nothing upsets the Powers of Death and Domination like the intervention of Life. Life can’t be controlled. It can’t be managed. It cannot be domesticated. The Powers of Death and Domination know they can’t continue to ignore Jesus. So, the Powers of Death, these systems of religious and political authorities start plotting how to stop him and if it means killing him, then so be it. But that’s not all. They can’t have Lazarus running around either. A person who has been recently resurrected messes things up, as well, so they start plotting to kill him, too.

So, Jesus and the disciples are gathered inside with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. From reading Luke 10 we can guess that Martha is doing what she always does, she’s cooking, putting out food, setting the table, and busy as a bee. She’s getting it done! And as we also can guess, sister Mary is not in there helping. From Martha’s perspective, every time there is work to be done in the kitchen Mary is off contemplating or reading or praying. If Jesus is around, no matter what needs to be done, Mary goes and sits at his feet, the place of a student, of a disciple, the place only males were allowed. And once more, Mary sits at Jesus’ feet, listening and learning. More than one onlooker says under their breath, “Who does she think she is?!”

At last, the meal begins. I wonder if Lazarus is hungry. After all, he's been dead for four days and here he sits at the dinner table tonight. Sometime during the dinner, perhaps toward the end of it, Mary gets up and goes to another room, then returns with a big bottle of expensive, perfumed lotion. She kneels at Jesus' feet, and she breaks the neck off the bottle, and then starts pouring the lotion all over Jesus' feet. Then, provocatively she begins to wipe his feet with her hair. She uses the perfumed lotion with such abundance that the sweet-smell spreads throughout the house.

Here is love acted out: extravagant, abundant, lavish, and generous. Here is gratitude. Mary is thankful. Her brother is alive! The gift of life is not something to be taken for granted, so she demonstrates her gratitude and her love in her way.

But old Judas has to pass judgment. This time Mary has crossed over too many boundaries. A simple thank you would have sufficed. This is outrageous.

As Judas exclaims, "She has wasted a huge amount of money here in rubbing all of this perfume on Jesus' feet. On his feet! What a waste! This could have been sold, and the money would have been taken and given to the poor."

Jesus dismisses Judas's objections with, "Leave her alone!"

Then Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me." It is a very strange thing for Jesus to say considering Jesus' constant, creative care for the poor.

But remember – and this is important – when rabbis quote part of a scripture verse, they are referring to the whole scripture passage. So, when Jesus says, "You always have the poor with you" he's not dismissing people in poverty. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 15 where it says, "You shall always have the poor with you;

therefore, I command you, you shall open your hand wide to your brothers and sisters who are poor, and to the needy in your land...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be" (v. 8, 11).

What Judas is expressing is the perspective that's been with us ever since Satan the serpent was the first free-market capitalist who convinced Eve to go for the easy, low-hanging fruit. It's the notion of scarcity; the deep belief that no matter how much we have it's not enough. More is always required. Scarcity means that we're in a closed system so that if we give to one thing we're taking away from somewhere else. Judas says that Mary is spending and wasting on Jesus what could be spent on the poor. There's not enough to go around.

To underscore Judas' belief that there is not enough to go around, John tells us that Judas was not truly concerned in helping poor people, his real motivation for his miserly misery was that he was skimming money off the top of the disciples' common purse. He's stealing because he's worried that he doesn't have enough. You must get more, always more. Scarcity very easily becomes greed, where the obsession with not having enough becomes an addiction.

What a contrast to Mary who acts in gratitude, and shares with a sense of abundance and generosity. For her, life is not a closed system. It's open to the grace and goodness and abundance of God. Instead of there is not enough for everyone so we have to get more and protect what we have from those who have not, Mary knows that God gives enough. God gives enough manna in the wilderness for everyone to have enough. Jesus shares loaves and fish in the wilderness with 5000 so much so, that twelve basketfuls are leftover. God gives enough so that if we open our hands and share with those who are poor, they too

will have enough. God's abundant way of thinking says that there is enough to go around but it needs to be properly distributed for all.

All these spiritually and materially powerful systems: Scarcity, Greed, Death, Domination, and more, are destroying our planet, dehumanizing us, and turning us into greedy, mean, fear-filled people, living in a time and place that has become strange.

So what do we do?

Elizabeth McAlister is considered a mother of the Peace and Anti-War Movement from the 1970's. She was friends with William Stringfellow, whom I quoted earlier, and with many other peace activists of those days. McAlister likes to say, "Gratitude is the only resistance to greed."

I am well aware that in a world that is crumbling around us and with society reacting with fascist/authoritarian governments, gratitude might seem to be a waste of time, and a drop in the bucket. Or as Judas said, "A waste." So, hear me this morning. One of the ways we are able keep singing the Lord's song in a strange land, a way we keep ourselves human in a dehumanizing world, is that we practice gratitude. Gratitude is able to face the pain, embrace the grief, and sing the blues, while also finding beauty and grace, and sing songs of joy and love.

If our world is going to have any healing and hope, it needs people, communities of people who practice gratitude, and who know how to sing the Lord's songs in a strange land.

The great Catholic thinker Henri Nouwen said, "Gratitude involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even though my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. I can choose to be grateful when I

am criticized, even when my heart still responds in bitterness.”

I think it’s interesting that our society, our world, has chosen to go with Judas’ model of economics and of life, over the Jesus model, over the Mary model. Scarcity over abundance; private gain over common good; greed and bitterness over gratitude.

Mary is a model of discipleship for us in contrast to Judas. But she’s also a prophet. In anointing Jesus’ feet the same way one would anoint Jesus for burial in a tomb, there, in front of a man named Lazarus who has just been in the tomb, Mary is a prophet who tells the truth. Jesus is going to die.

When Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, she begins the process of anointing a dead body, tenderly washing and caressing the body, even as Orthodox Jewish women do today when they prepare a body for burial. In Orthodox Judaism bodies ought not to be entrusted to strangers, but rather to those who loved the deceased.

In so doing, Mary is redefining our definitions of Messiah. Here is a different kind of king. “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me,” says Jesus. His kingdom is one in which everyone shares with everyone else. Of this kingdom there shall be no end, but it is a kingdom of the poor, of nobodies and sufferers. It is a kingdom that lives because of his death, a king who reigns from a cross. A king who will win by losing and whose kingdom is made up of the world’s losers.

And prophetic Mary was the first to tell the truth.

A pastor-friend in NC said, and he and his family lived in a parsonage near the church. Periodically, there is a knock on the parsonage door on Thursday night. A local chapter of AA meets at the church on Thursdays, and they pay a small

monthly rental for the use of the room. When the rent is due, one of the members will come over to our house on the meeting night carrying an envelope with the rental money collected from the group. Many of the members of this AA group have had very difficult lives. Some have lost jobs, some have lost their families, all have struggled with addiction. None of the members are wealthy, and they pass the hat for the rent, tossing in ones and fives and change until they scrape up enough.

One Thursday night, a week before Thanksgiving, there was the usual knock, and when he went to the door, indeed, there was a member of AA holding an envelope. The man handed it to him and said, "There's a little extra in there this time." Sure enough, the envelope was crammed with wrinkled bills and an assortment of coins, almost double the usual amount. A note was found with the money, "With thanksgiving to God and to the church for all the blessings we have received."

Some said the envelope was fragrant with costly perfume.

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