

Sermon – Lent 5 – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

John 12: 1-8

In a wonderful book called “Just Mercy,” death row attorney Bryan Stevenson recounts some of the last hours he spent with death row inmates. He was often asked to act for these men who had mostly exhausted their appeals. In the business that is state-sanctioned killing, justice and redemption often seem far away.

Within the book he tells the story of Herbert Richardson, a condemned prisoner on death row in Alabama. He called Mr. Stevenson to ask him to lodge one final application for a stay of execution. He had only 30 days to live. Despite a huge workload, Mr. Stevenson took on the appeal. Like a lot of last minute appeals for clemency this appeal was denied, leaving Mr. Richardson with only a week to live.

Despite the impending violence of his execution, the death-row staff tried to support Mr. Richardson the best they could. They asked him often if they could help him, if he had any special requests for food, for family visits and other such things.

Mr. Richardson did have one unusual request. He asked that the spiritual hymn, “The Old Rugged Cross” be played as he walked to the execution chamber where his life would end.

On the night of his execution after his family said their tearful goodbyes, Mr. Richardson was prepared for the electric chair. The guards then walked him slowly from his cell to the adjoining chamber. As he walked he listened to the soothing words and tune of “The Old Rugged Cross.”

*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross
The emblem of suffering and shame
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain*

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down
And I will cling to the old rugged cross
And exchange it some day for a crown*

Mr. Richardson died listening to this hymn.

For most of us we respond to the needs of a dying person with care and love. We hopefully try to satisfy as many of their needs as possible. If they want to reconcile with their creator and their families, we try to make that happen. If they want their favorite foods or their favorite music to help soothe their souls, we try to get it for them. If they want to talk, we listen. The tough Alabama prison guards did the same. They sought to address his needs even though within a few hours he would be dead.

Mary felt the same toward Jesus. As Jesus journeyed toward his date with destiny at Calvary, in the last few days of his life, he stopped in Bethany to visit his friends. By the time he had come to visit Mary, Martha and Lazarus he was a wanted man. The chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone that knew his whereabouts was to report him so they could have him arrested.

Mary's love for Jesus motivated her to act in this intimate way. She clearly understood that Jesus was a condemned man, sought after by the authorities and soon likely to die. She saw Jesus for the person he was – lonely, determined, faithful and loving of his friends.

Her tender act of anointing Jesus' feet with the costly perfume demonstrated her love for him and the intimacy they shared as friends. Jesus received her act of tenderness with a heart of gratitude, knowing it probably meant a lot to all three of his friends to care for him this way.

Judas though saw things differently. He didn't see the person of Jesus before him, he saw what he viewed as the waste of a precious resource that could fetch a lot of money. He didn't see Mary's gift for what it was. He only saw an opportunity go begging especially since he could have pocketed some of the proceeds. He saw through Jesus and Jesus' need in his final hours.

The actions of Mary and Judas provide for us examples of two ways life may be lived. Mary put Jesus and his needs ahead of her own, but Judas put himself first, wearing the disguise of a man concerned for the poor.

We too must decide how we will live our own lives. One way is to see those around us in terms of people to help and care for. Another way is to see them only as an annoyance, or resources to help us get ahead or as a tool to solve our problems.

In all groups, there are those that see deeper meaning in people's actions of love and those that can only see the topical issues of practicalities, the worry and the waste. These tensions often spill out into the open.

One of the biggest tensions to hit the Anglican and Episcopal church occurred in the 1830s. The parliament of Great Britain tried to regulate cathedrals to make the cathedral staff more accountable and wanted them paid less so more money would go to other parish clergy. This political action also accompanied internal divisions. A movement was born.

Known as the Oxford Movement, it shook the church to its foundation. The leaders sought to take the church back to its apostolic roots. The daily ritual of public worship was at the center of their ideal for church life, just as it had been in medieval times.

Music soon became a major item of contention. Organs were especially discussed in a not altogether positive way by the traditionalists of the day. It was argued that they took up too much space and cost money that otherwise could have been spent on art and architecture, they required an organist which cost money and they turned churches into practice studios and concert rooms.

Those in the Oxford Movement countered that the “occasional and judicious use of the organ can increase the grandeur and propriety of public worship.” The traditionalists reluctantly

agreed but wanted the organ in the west loft of the church, hidden away. But the Oxford leaders argued the organ and choir should be in the chancel close to the priests. They succeeded and this is why the organ and choir in our church are where they are. Vestments in liturgical colors, candles and processions are all attributed to the Oxford Movement tensions.

Over the few months since arriving here at the Church of St Luke and St Matthew, one of the most frequent comments I have heard is that the music program and choir are an essential part of the life of the parish. And I wholeheartedly agree.

Music for us could be said to be similar to the perfume used by Mary. It is a gift offered and something that fills the air and stimulates our senses. The music from a vibrant, full-strength, well-rehearsed choir touches the souls of the many that walk through the doors, whether for the first time or the hundredth time.

The music program is an important ministry of the parish. It is a gift to the congregation and an important component of our worship experience. We intend to build up the music program and will examine options to do that over the summer. As a vital ministry of the parish we need to properly fund it so that it can reach its potential.

No doubt we will have lots of discussion and their will be different points of view. Decisions will have to be made about the direction of the program and any budget that it requires. It is here at this juncture in the life of a parish where things can get rocky.

There are two ways I guess that we could see our music ministry? We could see as Mary saw. Music as a sort of sweet fragrance, as a gift given to others. Something that fills a room and stirs the spirits of all who hear it. Children and adults could receive the gift of learning to sing the full Anglican repertoire and also learn the theology that is embedded in the hymns and songs of praise we offer to God.

Alternatively, we could see the music ministry as Judas saw things. Inward looking and self-serving. We could worry about the cost and the waste of our limited income. Surely some might say that we should use the money to feed the poor, just as Judas did, or to buy art or fix the church building as others said.

Heavenly music caresses our souls each week. None of us know when the last Sunday will occur when we get to hear this gift of music. Maybe it will be the last truly personal gift we get to experience before we die. Should we deny that gift to each other and to the many visitors that come through these doors.

Jesus received a gift from Mary that he took with him as he went up to Jerusalem and to his ultimate death. Jesus told Judas that Mary's gift to him was special. He told Judas that the poor will always exist, and so they do, but like Jesus, we may not have you. We want to offer you the gift of love and fragrant music, so that it accompanies you on every step you take as you climb towards your own Calvary.

The prison officers in Alabama blessed Herbert Richardson with the gift of granting his dying wish to hear “The Old Rugged Cross” one last time. May I leave you with the same gift that surrounded this condemned man as he walked to his death.