

Worship for March 26, 2023
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Lenten Reading John 12:20-33 Robin McComas

*Call to Worship Isaiah 43:19

Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

*Hymn 35 Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, we are a people prone to wander, tempted to satisfy our immediate desires, or the most efficient solution to our challenges, instead of seeking a wider view that would lift up a just, peaceful, and plentiful world for all. Holy One, remind us of your love and purpose for all your children. Restore all our relationships and guide us home. Amen.

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

Our God is loving, just, and merciful. God delivers us from sin and restores us by grace. Friends, I declare to you, in the name and by the power of Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven and we can be at peace.

First Reading Psalm 126

Moments With Our Young Disciples

New Testament Reading John 12:1-11

Morning Message

In my very first week of seminary, in New Testament Survey, I was introduced to a new word and a new theological concept. Like any first week in any school, new words and concepts come at you so fast it's like trying to drink from a fire hose. This was no exception. On that particular day, the word was *kenosis*.

Every class began with a time of worship- prayer and a hymn or chorus. On this particular morning, my new friend and classmate, I'll call her Sue, walked to the front of the room, boom box in hand. She was leading worship, and it would begin with a contemporary Christian song, "Broken and Spilled Out." I had never heard it, but, this song had special meaning for Sue. It describes this gospel text in which Jesus and his disciples had gathered for a meal, and then, as an act of devotion, Mary broke a jar of sweet, expensive perfume and poured it over Jesus' feet, drying it with her hair.

It was an act of pure devotion. Some were shocked by it. It was too intimate a gesture. Judas ridiculed Mary, claiming that the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

Like the perfume, Mary's own life had been broken and spilled out before Jesus, only to be filled with a new life, following his example of humility, compassion, and love. Here she ministers to Jesus in an act of extravagant love.

Likewise, Sue's life was broken and spilled out through many years of ups and downs. She was no slacker. She gave and gave and gave til there was almost nothing left of her. Her physical and mental health were both suffering. She was in a spiritual desert. Sue's life was wholly unsatisfying. She was headed toward disaster.

It was in kneeling in humility before Jesus, admitting her failures, and seeking his mind and heart, that she found life. You see, what's behind that type of problem is a kind of spiritual arrogance. We think we can do it all. And maybe we can do a lot, but we aren't God. We need God and the people God places in our lives. Sometimes that's a hard and painful lesson. It was for Sue until her life was broken and spilled out before God and God's grace came spilling over her like a rushing waterfall.

Which, on that first class meeting, left us all prepared to receive the word of the day: "kenosis."

Kenosis is a Greek word which describes the self-emptying of Jesus' own will in order to be entirely receptive to God's divine will.

Paul writes:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross."

Paul is urging the good people at the Church of Philippi to adopt a kenotic way of life. Why? Because there had apparently been conflict and it was damaging the church. The members were not imitating Christ.

People bring baggage to church with them. Of course we do, because it is a safe place to lay down our burdens. Our church is often times our second home and family. Church folks may be the only family some people have. And have you ever known a perfect family? A family where everyone brushes AND flosses and never brings the car home on empty? Me neither.

So, at the First Church of Philippi, there's conflict and it is so serious that it threatens to fracture the fellowship. Oh, my. I could tell you some stories. I was once dispatched to mediate a church conflict. The plan was to work with the session two nights and the next week work with the congregation. Well, the first thing that happened was the session got into an argument about the interpretation of a Bible passage we were using for a devotion. This did not inspire confidence. The second night, the pastor had a heart attack. We were doomed.

That situation could have been resolved satisfactorily, if everyone had taken Paul's advice and emptied themselves of their tightly-held biases and taken on the mind of Christ. According to Paul, when Jesus emptied himself, he poured out his love. With an outpouring of love comes the other fruit of Spirit-joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The kenosis ethic invites us to imitate Christ, who took on a human body, growing and changing, feeling hunger and thirst, fatigue and pain, joy and love.

This moment with friends comes at the end of Jesus' time with them, indeed, he was in his final days on earth. Jesus was no doubt grateful for their hospitality. A good meal in good company. A gift. He welcomed the gentle anointing Mary provided. When Judas complained, Jesus told him to leave her alone- she was preparing him for his burial.

Can we place ourselves in that scene? If you were one of the guests that night, what might you be feeling? Not only was the room filled with the scent of rich perfume, it was filled with memories, miracles, acts of compassion, confrontations with the powerful, acts of love. Their hearts must surely have been breaking at the notion of Jesus' death.

It should occur to us that to break something may be a desirable thing. Like breaking a piñata at a child's party, or cracking an egg for breakfast. We hope how soon we can housebreak a new pet. We are relieved at the breaking of a habit. Athletes thrive on breaking records. In some cultures, breaking plates after a wedding is supposed to bring the newlyweds good luck. Those of us who follow Jesus hope to break the ways of sin that bring so much destruction upon God's people.

The promise of Easter is that, in his death and in his rising, Jesus has broken the powers of sin and death.

Centuries before this night, the psalmist wrote, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

About this psalm, theologian Frederick Buechner writes:

“You never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you’ve never seen before. A pair of somebody’s old shoes can do it. Almost any movie made before the great sadness that came over the world after the Second World War, a horse cantering across a meadow, the high school basketball team running out onto the gym floor at the start of a game. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure: Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention.

They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not, God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next.”

The same health issue that has me taking frequent sips of water standing at this pulpit, causes great problems for my eyes. They do not tear and this has damaged my vision. But, my doctor has me trying something new and I am hopeful.

Last weekend, I had little Freya in my arms and she was fussy. It was naptime, but she couldn’t quite get there on her own. So, I claimed the rocking chair. And you know what happened. The combination of motion and squeaking worked its magic and soon Freya had wiggled herself to sleeping position, working her little blond head under my chin, her soft breath brushing my neck.

I closed my eyes, just enjoying the silence, the sweetness, and I must have fallen asleep, too. You know, it’s amazing what God can do when we’re not looking. I woke to find something wet slipping down my cheek. A breakthrough.

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles’ Creed p. 35
* Hymn 580 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns
Pastoral Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

Gracious, loving, and abundant God, we praise you for the gifts presented today and for the intentions of your people in giving. Bless these offerings, of hearts and resources. May they equip the saints for their ministry and be a comfort to those in need. Amen.

*Hymn 702 Christ Be Beside Me

*Blessing

The cross...**we will take it.**

The bread...**we will break it.**

The pain...**we will bear it.**

The joy...**we will share it.**

The gospel...**we will live it.**

The love...**we will give it.**

The light...**we will cherish it.**

The darkness...**God will perish it.**

From *Stages On the Way*: Iona Community, Wild Goose Worship Group

*Postlude