

*Longing to be Faithful*  
*John 12:1-8*

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The Gospel reading this morning gives us an amazing glimpse into the life of the very earliest followers of Jesus. It is a fascinating story, filled with drama and tension, grace and peace. It gives us insight into the inner hearts of Jesus' followers and their longing to be faithful.

The story tells us that six days before the Passover Jesus arrived in Bethany at the home of Lazarus. This is the same Lazarus who Jesus had raised from the dead. The believers decide to give a dinner for Jesus. The stage is set. The dinner takes place in Bethany just before the highest holiday and just before Jesus is to be crucified. Those who love him must know that Jesus' teaching and preaching is creating tension with the authorities and his life is in danger. Knowing this, they also must feel quite sad and anxious. He is their teacher and they love him. They long to follow his way of being and they long to keep him with them. So, they honor him by giving a dinner. We are told that Martha served and Lazarus was one of those at the table. Then, we are invited into a very intimate scene. Mary took a pound of pure nard (something like lavender), anointed Jesus' feet with it and wiped his feet with her hair filling the room with a glorious fragrance.

Now the tension rises. Judas Iscariot challenges Jesus about this anointing. He wants to know why the perfume wasn't sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor. One denarii was worth about \$50 so 300 would have been worth \$15,000. This is a good question! That's a lot of money. Then Jesus says something very interesting. He tells Judas to leave Mary alone because she has bought the perfume for the day of his burial. The story ends with an amazing statement from Jesus: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

What I love about this story is how up close and personal we get to the early community. It becomes clear that they struggle with the same issues about faithfulness that we do. Two sides of the coin - on the one hand being faithful means serving others, in particular the poor. On the other hand, being faithful means being still and listening to the Holy Spirit who dwells among us. Two ways of being faithful – DOING OR BEING. The text sets up this tension - how is it best to be faithful? Do we show our faith by being or doing? Is faith about action or contemplation?

The story of doing for others is at the very core of our faith. Jesus told us to follow the great commandment – "Do unto others as they would do unto you." Christians throughout the centuries have gone about putting that commandment into action.

Last week I spent some time with a friend who lives in Charlotte, N.C. For years she has volunteered in a soup kitchen to feed the homeless in Charlotte. She always felt like feeding them was enough – a way to be faithful and to serve. Then a few years ago she was in Texas and she met a homeless man named Denver Moore who challenged that assumption. Through him, she realized that feeding the homeless was not enough. He convinced her that first and foremost everyone needed a place to live. So, she worked to help create housing for the homeless of Charlotte and named the housing complex Moore Place after Denver Moore. She and 6 other committed people raised 10 million dollars, 6 million for the construction of the apartments and 4 million for the

operating costs. 85 units were built and they are in the process of adding 35 more units. They also have 150 units scattered throughout the city. The journey of serving the poor in this fashion has been transformative for her – a journey of faithful attention to doing for others that has shaped her own life and way of viewing the world.

On the other side of the coin, the story of listening for God is at the core of our faith. Our longing to love God is offered through our attention to quiet and stillness and listening for wisdom and truth. Christians throughout the centuries have spent time in worship and contemplation seeking the transformative power of God's love.

This kind of quiet contemplation happens here at First Church every time we hold a Taize service on the second Sunday evening of the month. One part of the service is ten minutes of silence. Over and over again throughout the years people who attend Taize services come up to me to talk about the powerful experience of being quiet and still. There is a profound sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit as we sit together in silence. People who experience this presence often say things like: "I forget how much my soul yearns for silence – I am so busy doing things that I forget to be still."

Doing or being – action or contemplation – it is the question that our text puts forth for us to reflect on today.

During the last months of my father's life he lived in a hospital bed in the dining room of my parent's home. At some point during his illness he developed bacteria in his leg that left a huge wound down the shin of his right leg. For weeks and weeks each day my mother cleaned the wound and applied a new bandage as it very gradually healed. One evening, I found myself standing in the doorway of the dimly lit dining room watching my mother care for my father's leg. My father was asleep or very quiet as my mother silently attended him. After she removed the old bandage, cleaned the wound, applied the medicine and rewrapped the leg she gently covered his foot with his blanket. Resting her hands on his leg she whispered: "you, sweet, sweet man."

Suspended for a moment in time, I knew in the depth of my being that our faith is not about either/or, black or white. It is about both/and. In our doing, there is being. In our being, there is our doing. In our action there is contemplation and in our contemplation there is action. Engaging both aspects of our faith is our invitation and maybe that is why both are in the story that our Gospel has given us today.

May your Lenten journey be blessed with your longing to love God in doing and in being. Amen.

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