

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
March 21, 2010 – Lent 5
John 12:1-8 – Mary anoints Jesus
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

On this last Sunday of Lent our scripture readings are very rich indeed. They are about salvation, and they prepare us well for our walk through Holy Week that begins next week, on Palm Sunday.

The lesson from the prophet Isaiah (43:16-21) refers to the Exodus, to God's mighty action in delivering the Hebrew people from the Egyptians who enslaved them. At the Easter Vigil we will hear the account of how the waters of the Red Sea were parted to allow God's people to escape from Pharaoh's army. When Isaiah was writing, the Israelites had been in trouble again for many years – this time in exile in Babylon. But it was expected that Cyrus, the ruler of the Persian Empire who had conquered the Babylonians, would soon allow them to return to their land. Isaiah refers to the first Exodus because he is announcing a new Exodus: God's plan to bring God's people back from exile to the land God had given them long before. God says, "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." Isaiah proclaims that once again God will act in history to save God's people.

Psalm 126 celebrates the return from exile in Babylon. In a few words the psalmist conveys the relief and joy of people who had suffered for a very long time and now rejoiced because God had saved them. "Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves." God acts to save. May God be praised!

As Christians we proclaim salvation from God through Jesus Christ. This is a love story each one of us is invited to join. The gospels are full of this love story. They tell us about how Jesus showed human beings the love of God as he taught and fed and healed and forgave them. They tell us how people responded to Jesus. These sacred gospel stories have the power to shape us, if we let them. The Holy Spirit brings them alive.

This morning's lesson from the gospel of John is short but very full. Jesus' earthly ministry is nearly at an end. It is six days before his last Passover celebration. During his final days Jesus spent time with his closest friends, as any of us might do. He was very close to these siblings – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Remember that Jesus wept when he learned that his friend Lazarus had died, and he called Lazarus back from death to life.

Lazarus and Martha and Mary give a dinner for Jesus in their home. Judas was there. The other disciples may have been there as well. The focus of John's account is on only three of the “players” – Jesus, Mary, and Judas.

Jesus – rabbi, healer, and life-giver – was going to his death. Through Jesus God had acted to save Mary's beloved brother. And so Mary spent what would have been nearly a year's wages for a laborer on perfume. With this costly perfume she lavishly anointed God's anointed one, the Christ. A love story. Love given and love returned. Love shared. A beautiful story.

But Judas doesn't see it that way at all. He objects that Mary has wasted her money on this perfume. The money might have been given to the poor, surely a much better use of resources. We might think that Judas was right. After all, didn't Jesus teach

people to feed the hungry and clothe the naked? But John makes clear what is wrong with Judas' objection. "He said this not because he cared about the poor" but because he stole from the common purse and apparently regretted this missed opportunity for skimming funds. Though called by Jesus to be his disciple and follower, Judas refused to join God's love story. His heart was not moved with love for Jesus or love for the poor.

If you are a reader of fiction, you know that there are really only a few basic plots in literature – comedy or tragedy, love requited or unrequited. There are endless variations on these themes and no end of characters and circumstances to flesh out the basic plots. Just like life. But only a few basic shapes for a story.

The Church's story is a love story and part of the plot is known. God is love. The Trinity has been described as an eternal dance of love among the three persons of the one God: love given, love received, love returned. God is love. God loves every human being. God has acted in history to save human beings. In Jesus Christ God acted in a new way for our salvation. For the love of God and God's kingdom Jesus poured out his very life on the cross. He showed us the way of God's love – self-emptying, sacrificial love. By his death and resurrection Jesus also showed us the power of God's love. God's love has the power to draw people into the eternal dance of love. Will we join the dance, like Mary, or refuse, like Judas? The plot is still unfolding.

Let me tell you two brief stories. Thirty years ago my husband and I volunteered on Saturdays at a homeless shelter for women in New York City called the Dwelling Place. It had been started by a few Roman Catholic Franciscan nuns. There were many volunteers who helped the sisters keep the place going. I will never forget one man who came every Saturday to help. He wasn't comfortable relating to the women who came to

the shelter, so what he did was clean. He scrubbed floors and worked hard to do whatever he could, especially the heavy work the nuns found difficult.

One Saturday the sisters were thanking him and praising him for his help, and he told his story. Years before he had lost his job. He couldn't pay his rent, and finally he ran out of money entirely. He had no money and no food. One day after looking unsuccessfully for work, he went home to his apartment in despair. There on his kitchen table was a bag full of groceries. His landlord had bought him food. The man was overwhelmed by his landlord's generosity and promised to repay him as soon as he found a job. The landlord told him not to repay him, but instead to help someone else in need when he had the chance. So, years later, this man spent his time and his energy at a homeless shelter, witnessing to the dance of God's love: love given, love received, love returned.

Now another story. Recently I spent an hour in the waiting room of my car dealership while my car was serviced. It was fairly early in the morning. There were a few men there who were quietly reading. I was reading my Bible, beginning to prepare this sermon. Within a few minutes of each other two women came into the room. Sitting near each other, they began to talk. One was knitting a dish cloth for her church fair. The other was looking at a newspaper. The woman with the newspaper began to talk in a negative way about the money being sent from this country to Haiti, arguing that the money going there might be better used here. Though she was clearly well fed and clothed and had enough money for a car and a house, her attitude to the unfortunate people of Haiti was hard and a little bitter. I wondered if she was like Judas in today's gospel lesson, not moved by love for the needy in this country, but rather unwilling to

join the dance of God's love. I was sad that the church woman said nothing. I hope that her heart was full of God's compassion and love.

God wants lovers, willing lovers. That is our call in the church. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself."

Love is what we should be about here at St. Giles. Our worship should fan the flames of our love for God and our fellowship should fan the flames of our love for our neighbors. Every Sunday in the eucharist we recall the love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ. Every Sunday we receive the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. I pray that each of us will return the love of God as Mary did, giving of ourselves freely and willingly. Through love we spread the gospel of Christ and take our proper parts in God's story of salvation. Amen.