

Blessed are We, by Tim Hall

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C, 3 April 2022

[RCL:] Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

As we've been studying and talking about the Beatitudes this Lenten season we've been discovering and revisiting together so many ways that we are blessed as we strive to live our lives in Christ. This past week the subject of the beatitude was righteousness. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Paul speaks to the church at Philippi, and to us, this morning on just that subject. He reflects on his former life as a Pharisee, a persecutor of the church, and declares that, "as to righteousness under the law", he was blameless. But then the risen Christ appeared to Paul and everything changed. He was born again, just as Jesus had told Nicodemus, another Pharisee, on that night he had snuck away from his religious duties to discuss with Jesus how to live more completely in the presence of God.

After his eyes were opened to a new life in Christ, Paul realized and witnesses that his former ways were rubbish. Righteousness is not merely following the law, laws that may place social order and power above the love for every child of God, all made in God's image. And so he begins a new quest, hungering and thirsting for true righteousness in the eyes of God. It's a quest that leads him through many trials and much suffering. But it's a path that leads him, and us, if we strive to feed that hunger and thirst every day, to true righteousness and to salvation at the foot of the cross

As much as anything, our readings this morning are about change... giving up our old selves and putting on new garments, woven with the love of Christ, even in the face of suffering and certain death. We recited it in our beautiful Psalm this morning:

*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.*

This is God's promise to the Hebrews that had been sent into exile in Babylon that one day they will be made new. And it's a promise to us, that while we may be suffering one day, soon we will be filled with joy. Another beatitude... "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Everything will be made new, if we trust in the Lord.

Three years ago, shortly after moving into our home in Falls Church, Judy and I had workers in the house, finishing up on warranty work from our new home project. One of the workers was a young man named Freddy, who we learned was originally from Honduras. We laughed when we talked about him as young, because, as we learned as we chatted with him, he was actually 44 years old, which is looking pretty young to Judy and me these days!

Freddy was right there in the prime of life, having bought a townhouse in Burke where he lived with his wife and three kids, an 18-year old son who was finishing his senior year at Lake Braddock High, a 14-year old son, and a 7-year old daughter. His wife was completing her teaching certification. Freddy is the youngest of 7 children, some of whom were still in Honduras, and was working very hard to make a life for himself and his family here in the U.S., a country he loves.

As we spoke, Freddy began throwing in an occasional “Thank God” for this and “with God’s help” for that, especially as he talked about his life and family in Honduras. As we opened up to each other about our faith, we learned that he was involved with a church in Reston from which he had been on a couple of mission trips to Central America, one to Columbia and another to Honduras, where, with the little bit of monies they could raise, they were doing what they could to provide relief to the poor and afflicted people there.

You could tell it really excited him to talk about his experiences working for Christ in our broken world. It was heartwarming and inspirational to see him living out his faith in such a deliberate way, especially when coming from such a humble and challenging earlier life. In the words of the Lord, spoken through Isaiah, *“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.”*

That was a promise of a new life that the Lord made to the exiled Babylonians. And it is a promise of a new life to us, and one I’m sure Freddy felt. As we parted company that Springtime afternoon, we gave each other hugs as we had moved on from our old employer-worker relationship to this new brotherhood in Christ. Before departing Freddy made sure that we knew his last name was “Cruz”, Spanish for “cross” and that another part of his name could be translated as “I love the...”. And such was our encounter with “Freddy I love the cross of Jesus”. How cool was this chance meeting?

In chapter 11 of John’s Gospel, preceding today’s Gospel lesson, we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. And while the family rejoices and many believers are made that day, the chief priests and the Pharisees see this sign as yet another threat to their power, and *“from that day on they planned to put him to death.”* And they gave orders “that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.”

Jesus, knowing this, starts on his way to Jerusalem, but first, he stops in Bethany to visit his dearest friends. We don’t know why Lazarus, Martha, and Mary had become his close friends, but we do know that their love for one another was great. And we also know that when we are in danger and in pain, we long for someone to sit with us, to accept us as we are, to comfort us by just being there; someone who will not argue by telling us all will be all right, but someone who will share in our apprehension, without words. Such was the friendship between Jesus and these three siblings.

As many of you know, my father passed away the week before last, and while he had 100 good years and went peacefully, it was still so very sad to say goodbye, to realize I would never again be able to spend time with him, to ask him questions, to hug him and be hugged in return. I went to New Hampshire last week to spend time with my sister and brother-in-law, to comfort each other and to reminisce. Family.

It was much like this stop Jesus made on his way to Jerusalem. We already know that these siblings loved having him visit, with Martha anxious to feed him and Mary anxious to listen to him. In that previous meeting when the two sisters argued, his visit to them was for their sake. And when their brother had died, his coming to them was for all their sakes.

But now, a few days before his arrest and immense suffering, he comes to them for himself. He needs human companionship and human comfort. And they give it to him. The siblings don't know what is about to happen to him; they simply know that he needs to be near them. Martha, as is her habit, does what she is used to doing: she feeds the people she loves. "Martha served". Mary, as is her way, goes the extra mile. Food is not enough for her; only the most precious gift will do. In her symbolic act of pouring the costliest perfume on Jesus' feet, she honors him and reveals her deep love and gratitude, because he has indeed changed her life and made it worth living with his words and actions.

It's a lovely moment at that banquet of love. The whole house fills with an exquisite aroma of thanksgiving. A lovely moment spoiled by the one who has stopped loving his teacher. Judas claims that beauty and gratitude are a useless extravagance when there are poor people around. Whether he truly cared about the poor or not does not matter here. What matters is Jesus' response: Leave her, he says.

When a heart is filled to overflowing, don't quench it. When a throat sings of love and praise, don't silence it, just because others are weeping. An expression of love that rises beyond the absolute necessities of life is acceptable, Jesus is telling them. This is a special occasion. He knows that he will not be seeing his friends again. He will carry with him the aroma of their love and devotion. As he stumbles with the cross on his back, the stink of the crowd, of blood and sweat and ugliness all around him, he will remember this moment of overwhelming gratitude. His earthly life has not been easy and comfortable. This dinner with friends, their laughter, Martha's good food, and Mary's gift of love are the last reminders of what is good in this earthly life. We are glad that he is being given this last gift among dear friends.

The suffering that is about to begin is the aberration. What is normal is life with all its good gifts: Love of family and friends, food for the body, and beauty with all its appeal to the senses. This story is a permission for us also to cherish these good gifts.

Martha, Mary, and Lazarus have all been changed by this man, Jesus. They have given up their old ways and are living life anew, because of his love for them... and their love for him. Soon the disciples, even Peter, after Jesus washes their feet, will finally get it. And they, too, understanding how they are blessed even in their suffering, will live life anew, spreading the

Gospel, this Good News taught by their teacher, “Rabboni”, through his words and actions, to their brethren and then to the four corners of the world.

And Saul, “a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church”, will be forever changed and become [his most ardent follower after his encounter with the risen, glorified Christ on the road to Damascus](#). With his new name and his new life, Paul also knows about suffering. Imagine him sitting in a prison room somewhere in Rome. He has already talked so much about his Christ that even the praetorian guards know the name. Paul’s love for Christ is like that perfume of Mary’s... poured on the feet of Jesus. It is extravagant beyond knowing. He spends his time in his prison cell remembering those he loves and writing them letters.

Paul could have ignored the call and gone on to live a comfortable life. But the call of Christ was too strong... it could not be ignored. As he tells the church at Philippi, [the women and men he has loved for years](#), “...whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish.”

As we prepare for Holy Week here at Good Shepherd, I hope you can join us as we mark this most special and holy time in our lives together on the way. We’ll start with our gathering for Palm Sunday, when triumph turns to sacrifice, together again for the first time since 2019. And then we’ll gather for a sacred supper on Maundy Thursday when we will wash each other’s feet, as Mary did for our Lord and our Lord did for us. And then walk with us to the Cross on Good Friday as we revere the stations together on our outdoor pathway at noon and gather inside in the evening to read John’s Passion, hear a message, and pray the Solemn Collects.

It’s never too late for us to live life anew. To welcome Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. We are blessed in so many ways, even when we are feeling poor in spirit, when we mourn, when we hunger and thirst. We, too, like the apostle Paul, like Nicodemus, like Martha and Mary and Lazarus, like Freddy, will be forever changed when we cherish the good gifts that God has bestowed on us and share this love of Christ, through our words and actions, with those around us, both near and far. We will be blessed when, in the words of Paul, we “press on toward the goal... for the prize of the heavenly call of God... in Christ Jesus.”

~ Amen

Note: [Text in blue was taken from “Comfort in the Midst of Suffering”, written by Katerina Katsarka Whitley for Lent 5 \(C\) and found at Sermons That Work](#).

My dad was a wonderful man and I cherish the lifetimes we shared. But, as Paul has said, that earthly life pales when compared to the glory we have in Christ Jesus.