

Eye on the Goal
Philippians 3:1-16
March 17, 2019

I used to love going to the movies alone. For me there was nothing more annoying than going with someone who talked through the film and distracted me from my immersion in the picture. And this is especially true if the person you are with has already seen the film and is only too ready to let you know in advance what's going to happen. "Oh, look, he's forgotten to put the letter back in the drawer!" The police will find it and it will draw him into the net of suspicion and then...." Wait a minute, you say; I don't want to know what happens; that will spoil my experience of the film. Please, not another word."

John in his gospel tends to whisper asides to us readers just to show that he sees life in a deeper way than just giving us the main facts of the event. He wants us to see that even in ordinary events, like this anointing in Bethany, there is a sign of the eternal lying below the surface.

There are two sound tracks, as Tom Long puts it, in John, one that tells the story and another the deepest truth about the story. He invites us to the dinner party in Bethany, but also wants us to know the holy depths involved in the story: the hint of resurrection with Lazareth present; the words of treachery in Judas's pious words about the money wasted; the action of Mary pointing us to her role as prophet. Long points out that:

Jesus is not merely eating and drinking with friends -- he is the lamb at the Passover feast, and John wants us to smell the fragrance of the perfume that fills the house as the aroma of holy death. John whispers between the lines of the story because he wants us to see what is truly happening, and to believe.

So we have to forgive John for whispering to us and giving us clues as to how the plot will unfold in the end. What we see in this action of Mary is her total commitment to the Lord she worships in this unusual action. For a woman to let her hair down in public was scandalous in Jewish society. For her to pour a year's wages over his feet and wipe

his feet with her hair was nothing less than radical and extraordinary. It is the action of a disciple who truly loves her Lord and sees in his journey to Jerusalem a pathway to death. This is her way of demonstrating her love, her worship and her insight into what Jesus was doing for her and for the world. He was indeed the Passover lamb who would die for her and the world.

It's interesting to me that a woman like Mary is able to see below the surface and point to the spiritual truth through her action. Women in the Gospels and in the early church history fare rather well compared to their standing in that culture.

We have seen costly worship and devotion exercised by Mary. We also find this devotion and dedication expressed by Paul in this letter to the Christian community in Philippi. He tells these folks that they are to stay clear of the troublemakers in Philippi who are telling them that they need to add something to their faith in Christ. They insist on circumcision and other Jewish rites in order to be a true Christian. He warns them, not because there is a huge Jewish population in Philippi. But rather the danger for Gentiles that exists to be influenced by the deep and impressive Jewish faith: its laws and rituals and history. For new Christians who read the Jewish Scriptures as their own there was a sense of identity, of promise, and certainty within Judaism that could easily sway the young Gentile Christians within the house church community in Philippi. "The dogs", Paul's name for these troublemakers, are to be avoided. We Christians, he tells them, are the true circumcision.

Paul gets really exercised any time anyone seeks to add anything to the sufficiency of Christ's work of redemption. So he parades his own credentials as a loyal Jew. He tells them that he considers all this pedigree rubbish to be thrown out in comparison to winning Christ.

Now this wasn't junk Paul is willing to throw out to win Christ. This is truly valuable personal, spiritual, religious history for Paul. But to win Christ is so much more valuable for Paul that he is willing to relinquish his entire religious heritage.

I wondered to myself what I have to continue to discard in order to win Christ. I wonder what attitudes, cherished beliefs, family myths, I

have to let go in order to accept and receive Christ's grace? Think of all the stuff we bring to the table in our negotiations with God. We bring the assumptions we inherited from our culture, our families, and our education, from a whole host of sources, all of which may in fact fly in the face of accepting Jesus' life, death and resurrection as the only basis for my salvation. My natural inclination, like many in our society, and certainly that is an assumption I inherited from my parents, namely just be respectable and do your best and that is all you can do! After all society tells me that truth is relative and all that is required is sincerity. Just do your best, believe what you believe sincerely, and act ethically, and God will accept us. Is that really what the Scriptures teach us?

And let's not forget that Paul is writing this letter at one of the lowest points in his Christian life. He is in prison in Ephesus. Who knows what deprivations, punishments and anxiety he is experiencing. On top of the news that the Corinthian church is seemingly against him, he is in prison for preaching the good news of Jesus. It is a dark moment in his Christian experience!

On the other hand, and there's always another hand, isn't there? Notice that Paul's faith in Christ doesn't mean that Paul's struggle for spiritual maturity has ended. Indeed, it has just begun. His life is now about his passionate desire to know Christ better, more intimately, and more fully. He gave up on the petty rules and regulations of his rich Jewish heritage because he knows that it can never provide right standing with God. Only Christ can provide that for Paul and for us.

So what does Paul do? He tells us that his confidence in Christ doesn't make him apathetic, nor does it make him complacent. He doesn't assume that his conversion was the end of the story. He presses on in his spiritual journey. Christ has embraced him and that relationship now influences deeply his entire life. Everything he now does, dreams, hopes for, is founded on that relationship. But more than that, he now has a very different focus in life. Paul says,

...this one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Don't get Paul wrong here! He is expending his energy, not to gain God's favour, but to work out in life what he has received as a gift. He is, like all of us, released to run the race without watching his feet. Resting in God's grace, receiving the gift of free salvation through faith in Christ, doesn't mean a life of passive acceptance. For Paul, believing involves wrestling, running, striving, and fighting the good fight of faith. The language to describe this experience of working out our salvation is telling: it is vivid, tense: pressing, stretching, pushing, straining. In all of this, the heart pumps, the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the sweat runs down our faces. This is some demanding life this Christian journey.

This is the tension we live with. We work because God works in us. I know because I am known. Paul opened his letter with this encouragement: *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil 1:6)* In other words, I live out his spirit in me in my everyday life, not to gain God's approval, but because of his forgiveness already received.

Paul will go on in the letter to remind them and us that the alternative doesn't have a positive end. Those who live with their minds set on what they can get out of life, whose god is their belly, as Paul puts it, have set a dangerous course that leads to destruction. We, on the other hand, who have been saved by Christ, are citizens of heaven and live accordingly. We are pilgrims and strangers on earth, looking for that city whose foundation are God. We live with a different perspective, a different finish line, a different set of values.

Mary had it right after all. She gave up the costly oil and was willing to step outside social restrictions for women and display her love for Jesus. She, like Paul later, and like every Christian since that day, found in Christ a love that ravished her heart. My prayer for each one of us here today is that we too will experience this love of Christ in our hearts and that it will shape all we do in life as a response of love.

Amen