

**Sermon at St. Andrew's Church
Lent 5C - April 3, 2022
by the Rev. Connie Jones**

John 12:1-8

Fifteen years ago, my dear husband Bill was in at-home hospice care, bedridden and increasingly weak from brain cancer. Colleagues and friends and neighbors visited him – read to him, enjoyed music and movies with him, and told him they loved him. God bless them, but things were bleak.

One day we had an unexpected visit from a young woman from church. Jane was – still is – a massage therapist. As she talked soothingly to Bill, she gently took the sheet off his feet, took a vial from her pocket, and began to massage his feet with ointment. The room fell silent. But I could see that Bill, eyes closed, was experiencing – well something like the pleasure of heaven itself. Watching this scene – and you understand -- I was weak with grief by this point, and maybe a little bit spacey – I could swear I was watching Mary of Bethany, kneeling before Jesus, massaging his feet, in her brother Lazarus's house. Doing it, as the Gospel narrative points out, in anticipation of Jesus's cruel crucifixion, which she could in no earthly way prevent. **Out of** profound love, she was giving the most valuable thing she had, something beyond money reckoning (which Judas the betrayer and thief could not possibly understand) – giving it out of helpless but utterly pure love.

Were others in the room blushing with embarrassment? to see Jesus being so tenderly and intimately touched, in public, as the fragrance of the oil perfumed the whole room? Well, Jesus did not draw back. The man they called Lord (as we ourselves do), the man we portray in art as sitting on God's own throne, humbly accepted the touch, the ministration, of a *woman*.

There are moments in this life when we witness – or receive – love like this. There are moments when, by the grace of God, we may *give* it.

Each instance is completely new,
 completely specific to the people and circumstances involved.
 It makes your heart beat faster.
 It has such clarity you can remember and describe it,
 as if it had a signal fragrance.
 It may only have been a brief word or glance,
 that says I see your pain but I'll give you all that I have, which is love.
 Or, on the other hand, it may have required massive logistical effort –
 like World Central Kitchen people greeting refugees getting off trains in Poland
 with soup cooked in a cauldron the size of a Volkswagen beetle.

We might imagine love like this to be quite helpless.
 It often doesn't change the situation, or have an audience.
 Yet sometimes it operates in plain sight, at plenty of risk.
 We might scoff: Can soup stand up against tanks and missiles and wicked ambition?
 Besides, how do you know who deserves a bowlful
 and where can you find profit or reward in it?
 How do you know you will be safe yourself?

Yet the love that made that soup is *as one piece*
 with the energy of love that flung the stars into the sky at creation.

To be in the presence of such an act of love –
 even to be touched by it remotely, on television or Facebook maybe –
 is to catch a whiff of its perfume.
 It is to experience, if just for a moment, the sturdy, but inexhaustible love of God.
 Forgiving, cleansing, feeding, soothing, spreading hope,
 and standing up to death itself.

It is like.....like a dazzling drop of dew that distills on a blade of grass.
And O Lord God, you know it when you see it.

There are just two things I know to say to you about this.

For this God-with-us love to distill, to become enfleshed in the world's story,
 all of us are needed –
 the good people you might expect, and the sort of cranky backbenchers as well.
 All of us.
 But don't worry.
 If at any moment "you're it,"

I promise that you will be given all the strength and wisdom you need.

You need merely to consent to act. Then roll up your sleeves.

The second thing I must tell you is just as important.

You must consent when *you* are the one whose feet are to be washed.

I know, I know. You see yourself as a helper, someone who cares for others.

You remember everybody's birthday,

you bring a hot meal to your sick friend and you stay to wash the dishes after a party.

But for the life of you, you can't manage to accept help – or acknowledge needing it.

"I've got this," you say. "I'm good."

But if the Lord of life himself,

the Christ who was with God at the creation of all things,

could take off his sandals so a kneeling woman could wash his feet,

and then *dry them with her hair* –

if Jesus could soon afterwards bow down to wash his disciples feet

when he knew he would soon die –

then we too are called both to love, and to humbly *receive* love.

It is all one piece, but it moves, and flows like a dance,

and all the while it distills and magnifies,

it spreads, as light does in a dark room.

Light that can never be extinguished.

It is the love of God.

When I remember my husband Bill's last weeks – that terrible time,

I know I witnessed the miracle of this love so clearly

I could reach out my hand and touch it.

I saw the dance – how as Bill received love he was reciprocating it,

so that his friends had it back in larger and even purer form.

The math or the chemistry of this make no sense,

because it was a time of loss and sadness.

Yet there was abundance and not scarcity.

Running through terrible sorrow, there was a miraculous vein of joy.

All this, my friends, I understand somehow.

Jesus certainly knew it was true as he consented to be nailed to a cross.

It is the truth about God's love

in which we live and move and have our being.

It's true at any time of suffering, or loss, or separation – even death itself.

Pass it on.