

April 7, 2019 - Lent 5C

“Faux Righteousness” - Rev Seth D Jones

Scripture: Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Today, we see Judas say one thing while doing another. This is why I call it “faux righteousness”. Faux righteousness is righteousness used to mask self-interest and acts of evil. Here, Judas feigns disgust at what Mary of Bethany is doing with Jesus in order to divert attention from any concern that might be floating in the group that he might be the reason the purse for the disciples’ ministry never has what they thought it was supposed to have in it.

Let’s put this story in context. Notice when this story is happening. It is right after Jesus raised Lazarus, Mary and Martha’s brother, from the dead. The funeral wake has literally just ended. In the ancient world, a wake was several days of feasting in remembrance of the one who died. Now, Lazarus is up and around. Rather than a meal in remembrance of the dead, Mary and Martha are giving a meal in honor of Jesus, who has turned death into life. In between the raising of Lazarus and this meal, Jesus has been condemned to death for his brazen act of raising Lazarus.

Judas sees a lot of unrighteous behavior going on in the house. A dead man is walking around the house. Judas’ well-acted moral code is deeply tried when Mary pours out a pound of perfume over Jesus’ feet, then wipes it with her hair. Feet, hair, women touching men, and expensive perfume wasted - the situation surrounding Judas really can’t get much worse.

The perfume is about \$20,000 worth, the equivalent of 12 ounces of Clive Christian No. 1 today. Mary and Martha just happen to have a jar of this laying around the house. This tells us something about this family, though. They are extremely wealthy. It is likely that Mary and Martha are primary donors to Jesus’ wild and crazy ministry throughout the land.

Judas knows all this and he generates a well-acted offense at everything going on. He focuses on the perfume and the cost.

“You just dumped out a year of good wages. It could have been used to help the poor!”

Judas is playing a game we see played all the time in the culture today. Who can generate the most outrage about the thing he or she feels most righteous about? We do this on Facebook. We do this during election cycles, which never end now. We watch this on whatever our chosen outlet for news, punditry and propaganda is these days. Who can be the most outraged and upset about the *most important issue of all time*? Then, after we have been righteously outraged on behalf of our chosen issue, we go out and participate, either directly or indirectly, in something that directly contradicts what we were so upset about in the first place.

Very few of us do this to the level Judas does, but many of us cover not so ethical things we do with a heavy dose of redirected righteous against others who do those same things. Judas is a bad dude, though. The Gospel writer spells it out for us clearly:

Judas did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the purse, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

This is faux righteousness in full display. The thing about faux righteousness is that it often arises out of righteous concerns. Judas is not wrong in what he has said about Mary pouring out the perfume. Yeah, selling the perfume really could have helped a lot of people. If it were sold, \$20,000 in perfume, a luxury item if ever there was one, could provide so many things right in our neighborhood that would help people out in important and huge ways.

Righteousness is incredibly important in Scripture, but the righteousness of Scripture, the righteousness of God, is not the same as the righteousness we earn and expect others to earn. Paul understands this. Paul calls out the faux righteousness of the Philippian church in our reading today. He says,

I can play your righteousness game. In fact, I can play it really, really well. Look, here is where I come from and what I have done. Check all this out: I am the most Hebrew among you. I am a member of the tribe of Benjamin. Furthermore, I know the law as well as anyone can because I am a Pharisee. I am so much a Pharisee that I was hired out by the Roman Empire, of whom I am a full citizen, to hunt down Christians. There are people back in Jerusalem who can testify that no one upheld the law of the Torah better than I did. So there. Is that righteous enough for you?

But then Paul says something incredible.

“I regard all these things as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

Paul is, quite literally, giving everything up that defined him. It would be like me lighting my degrees on fire in the middle of the church here, along with my ordination diploma, along with my college degree, my birth certificate, and the family tree my grandmother gave me so many years ago. I just have to mention here that when the Bible translates this word as *rubbish*, you need to know that the translators of Scripture are protecting your tender ears from vulgar language. Paul is using the strongest possible word for dung that was available to him. In other words, Paul’s accomplishments are like the excrement of animals compared to what he gains in his relationship with Christ.

That, Paul says, is where true righteousness comes from, our relationship with Christ. Righteousness is a thing received and given, not a thing earned and achieved. Paul says he does not

*have a righteousness of (his) own that comes from the law, but that which comes through the **faithfulness of Christ** -the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*

When we claim righteousness on our own terms, we will always be working against ourselves. We cannot fulfil the requirement of that which makes us righteous. Like last week, we will never measure up. We will either convince ourselves of a delusion, or we will give up trying, or we will cover up and misdirect so that others think we are righteous, all the time knowing that we are committing great acts of unrighteousness. In other words, to claim righteousness for ourselves, especially against others, is always a lie. To quote Sam Elliott in the movie Roudhouse, *“That hurts, don’t it?”*

So what are we trying to gain in our faith? What are we trying to accomplish in our faith? It seems to me that the work of faith is to become more like Christ, to become more aligned with God’s love in the world. And it’s hard work. We’re earthbound creatures who have heavenly hopes. We want our lives to count for something. But I think we have this process all backwards.

When Judas says *“what is she doing with that perfume, we could have paid for five kids to go to school for a year, we could have fed 500 people for a month, we could have built a clinic in Mozambique”*, Jesus says *“leave her alone, she bought this perfume so she might keep it for the day of my burial.”* We’re headed to the cross. Next week is Palm Sunday, so Mary of Bethany is preparing Jesus for his death.

Then Jesus says *“you always have the poor with you but you don’t always have me”*. To rephrase Jesus’ statement: *“You could have been helping the poor already, but you haven’t. This is why they are always with you. Furthermore, there will always be people like you, Judas. But there won’t always be people like me around. Who will you follow?”*

The reason we have all this backwards is that, if we receive our righteousness because of Christ’s faithfulness toward us, then any acts of righteousness we perform are because Christ is acting through us and because we are seeing Christ in those toward whom we perform these acts. We are therefore always looking for Christ in others. We have to find Jesus in people now, even when he is not physically here. And that means we have to be in the world with other people to do this.

And what is it worth to do so, to seek Christ in others, to find the righteousness in others that we have already been given by God? What does it look like to act on the righteousness we already have in Christ? It looks like about \$20,000 worth of perfume poured out in honor of Jesus Christ. Mary of Bethany is doing a kind of performance art piece with Jesus for our eternal benefit.

Paul puts it this way in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other an aroma that brings life.

We become the perfume poured out in honor of Christ when we become like Christ in the world. Doing things that are righteous, that reflect the Christ within us, are not so we can earn a place at the banquet table. We already have a place, if we wish to accept the invitation. Nor is it to become a better person. What does that even mean? The good things we do, after we come to Christ, are a result of knowing Christ, not because we are 'getting better'.

No, this is all about letting Christ shine through us. Mary's act with the perfume is a celebratory honoring of what happens to all of us when we live into the Resurrection that is on the other side of Jesus' death on the Cross.

When I was leading spiritual direction for ex-prisoners in Minneapolis, there was a guy there named Russell. Russell had been in and out of jail and prison most of his adult life. Drugs, break-ins, dealing, assault. He could not keep it together for long stretches of time. But he was, surprisingly, a loving and gentle person. One of the things Russell would do would be to wake up on Saturday morning and convince his girlfriend to help him make about 150 sandwiches. Then Russell would put them all in a cooler and he and his girlfriend would drive around the city to where the homeless hung out and give them sandwiches for lunch.

When I asked him why he did this, he didn't really have an answer. Did it make him feel good? Sometimes, but it just seemed like the right thing to do for the day. Did he feel like he had to? No, he never felt like it was something he had to do. It just seemed like the right thing to do. Did it make him a better person?

One day, while Russell was out delivering sandwiches, he saw a guy ride by on a bike identical to the one that was stolen from Russell the week before. Russell ran after the guy, tackled him off the bike, and beat him up. Russell didn't show up for our spiritual direction group for about 3 weeks because he was in jail for assault and battery. It wasn't his bike, just a bike that looked like his.

Russell had issues. He was messed up from a messed up life. There is no defense for his actions. But he came back to the group. He made no excuses. He felt bad. Interestingly, none of that took away from the righteousness of his actions with the sandwiches. And even more surprising, he did not lose dignity in my eyes or the others at the table, and Russell struggled to find ways to restore the dignity he had taken from someone else. A surprising outcome in the face of violence and short tempers and perceived wrongs. But it is also a testament to righteousness received rather than righteousness earned.

What do we want from our lives of faith? What do we want from our church?

Is it to feel good about what we have done, or to be recognized for the acts of good we have done, or to earn our way into God's good graces?

Well, we can't earn our way into what we have already received, and recognition of things done is really all about our egos and our personal needs. So it can't be about that. There will always be more poor people to help. Are we doing it now? There will always be people who take advantage of the righteousness and grace God shares with all people, people who turn that righteousness and grace into rules and boundaries that justify why you are saved and they aren't.

The surprising twist in all this is that the only way we can know what we have been already given by God is by seeking it out in others, and in doing so we realize that, when we seek Christ in others, we find Christ in ourselves.

And it seems to me, when we see Christ in others and understand the same to be true of ourselves, that this love, this promise, and this inspiration from God is for us, then there would be no amount of perfume and no amount of honoring that would express how incredible that truth is for all of us.

Amen.