

Date: Sunday March 21, 2010

Scripture: John 12:1-8

Title: “A Reminder”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus calls us to care for the poor.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Through the sacrament of Holy baptism shared today, we are reminded that the time to serve the Kingdom of God is now.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

I’m not being political, and there are many examples I could offer to begin today’s sermon including health care, but now with snow on the first two days of spring, I feel drawn to a situation in which former Vice President Al Gore was making a presentation on a radio program about the dangers of global warming. Hard questions were raised, issues were addressed, but the talk stayed on the topic.

The next day a caller phoned in with objections – not about the science, not about the cause and effect of humanity’s actions, or the substance of Al Gore’s claims. The caller didn’t dispute any of the facts presented the day before. The caller criticized Nobel Prize winner Gore because he said Al Gore rode a jetliner to get to the radio show. His point was that if Gore really believed in global warming he should have proved it by staying home and not riding on a jet. In other words, Al Gore was contributing to the cause of global warming.

I have a friend who told me Al Gore is a hypocrite in the global warming debate because he lives in a big house. I reminded my friend that he, too, lived in a pretty good sized house. He replied that the difference was that he – my friend

- didn't think global warming was a real issue. OK, so let me get this straight. You can do what you want when you don't take a stand. But when you are willing to take a stand and work for a cause, you are expected to live by the standards that other people set for you. That sounds challenging and difficult. Who wants to take a stand under those conditions?

Author Frank Ramirez writes that there is a term for the type of argument when you can't answer the science, the facts of the case, or the logic made by your opponents, so you substitute a personal attack. Now I'm not an attorney, but I understand this is referred to as an Argumentum Ad Hominem. It's an argument against the person. Attack, attack, attack, and more important, distract, distract, distract. Sounds an awful lot like U.S. politics of the 21st Century.

Here's another example of how it works. If someone takes a stand against poverty, you don't address those issues – you publish photographs of their comfortable home to suggest that they're just a hypocrite. If a former member of an administration writes a book about abuses they observed, the charges themselves are not addressed. Instead, the author of the book is demonized. If someone introduces a legislative initiative, and the other party doesn't find it to be appealing, try to make the sponsors of the legislation fail rather than provide a solid alternative that might help those in need. Both of our political parties are guilty of this behavior.

The ministry of Jesus focused on the dispossessed, the alienated, the marginalized, the outsider, the suffering – and of course the poor. This is not

surprising, if you read the whole Bible. The Torah, the law contained in the first five books of the Bible, is concerned with justice in the community. The history of the kings as presented in the Bible is in part the story of the struggle for a stable society based on justice for all. Though the prophets did sometimes look to the future, and also spoke out against foreign oppressors, they were largely concerned with justice for widows, orphans, the poor, and those who were struggling at the margins of the society.

When Jesus spoke at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, the scripture he chose to read was from Isaiah 61:1 – “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” Which brings us to today’s passage. Time was running short. Try to imagine what it was like for Jesus, knowing a terrifying and painful death was securely in his future and now suddenly things are no longer safe. Anxiety and anguish surely must begin to appear.

In today’s Gospel reading from John it is clear that the home of the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, a few miles from Jerusalem, provided a welcome respite from care and responsibility. Jesus had his disciples with him, of course, throughout his ministry, but Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are different – they’re his friends.

Six days before the Passover, less than a week before the horrific drama of the crucifixion makes possible the glory of the resurrection, Jesus sits at the table

with Lazarus, whom he raised from the dead. Martha is serving. And Mary, the one criticized by her sister once for spending too much time kneeling at the feet of Jesus and attentively listening to his words, once more kneels at his feet. This time it's because she has taken out a jar of precious ointment and anointed Jesus with it.

Judas objects – couldn't this perfume have been sold and the money given to the poor? He immediately criticized Jesus for allowing this to happen. The perfume was expensive! It was 300 *denarii*. A *denarii* was a day's wages. Allowing for 52 Sabbaths when no work was allowed, and a lunar calendar that was a little shorter than the solar calendar, it becomes clear that this offering to Jesus costs about a year's wages. How many of us would offer a year's wages to the work of the Lord?

Now the author of John questions the real motivation of Judas, but more important in the passage is how Jesus answered: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:7-8).

Mary seems to recognize that Jesus is as good as dead, that his advocacy for the poor, his words that challenged the rich and powerful, his healing ministries, and his action in raising her brother from the dead make him a target. Jesus is going to die. And she anoints him as she would have anointed his dead body, preparing it for burial. The difference is she does it while he can still enjoy it. How many times have you seen hundreds, thousands of dollars spent on flowers at a funeral and wondered why those flowers couldn't have been sent when that person was still living (Ramirez)?

Ironically, the phrase, we will always have the poor with us, is sometimes used as justification to do nothing for the poor. I've heard it said, "What's the use of trying to help the poor. Even Jesus said you will always have them in your midst." So there are those who want to just criticize the church for the efforts it makes in caring for the poor. Make no mistake, sometimes the church needs to be criticized, but it can be one more example of going after the one willing to take a stand rather than taking constructive action.

Let's do our homework. What was Jesus really saying when he made reference to always having the poor? Well, in his day people knew their scriptures, and when a person referred to just a part of a verse of scripture it was assumed they were quoting the whole passage. That's a good reminder for the times when we try to use just a word or two or a line of scripture to make our arguments.

Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy 15, which describes the obligations the people will have to take in order to care for the poor in their midst. It states: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land'" (Deut 15:11). In other words, stop worrying about what Mary is giving – and get busy with the work of the Lord. Jesus does not say we take care of the poor because it is easy or because it gives us a warm feeling. Do it because it is the right thing.

In a certain sense we ought to be treating everyone with the kindness, as if their funeral was just around the corner – because it is. Sooner or later we will all follow Jesus, toward death and to a new life ever after. So, let's all skip the

criticizing and do some good now. Send flowers to those we love now. Combat poverty now. Care for the planet now. Provide for the health care of others now. Witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ now. On this day that we welcome two people to the community of all God's people, and that's good news, we are reminded that the time to serve the kingdom of God is now. Let us pray.

Lord,

We are reminded again to be about your kingdom at this time. Through any effort we can make to serve another in your name, we are bringing about your kingdom. So we ask, help us to help others. This we pray, Amen.

Offering:

The Kingdom of God is one of the most frequently used phrases in the New Testament. We can be about the Kingdom of God through our morning offering. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication:

Lord, accept and bless our best offerings and efforts dedicated now for your use. We pray that they are all used for the goodness of your kingdom. In Jesus name, Amen.

Benediction:

God's spirit is among us and now we go to be among others. What's done is done. We greet the future now blessed by the Spirit of God. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Ramirez, Frank; [The Minister's Annual Manual](#); Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2009.