

Immanuel United Church
The fifth Sunday of Lent
April 3rd, 2022

Welcome

Call to Worship: *(based on Isaiah 43:16-21)*

Thus says the Lord,

who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,

**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.

The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;

**for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,**

**to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.**

Prayer:

**Holy One, as we light our Christ candle today,
may we be mindful of how your love persistently
shines even in our times of wandering,
our times of searching for the truth,
our times of doubt and pain.
Be the light of our lives, we pray;
bring us back to you again.**

(Light the candle.)

Hymn: VU 120 *O Jesus, I Have Promised*

Scripture: John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served,

and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, '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.'

The Choir Anthem: Into the Woods My Master Went

Reflection: Love Is the Touch (MV 89)

In God's theatre, today's reading, six actors play out the song, Love Is the Touch, in their words and actions. These actors are God (of course), Lazarus, Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary, Judas Iscariot, and Jesus. It was six days before the Passover when Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus. It's interesting to watch the movements and knots in relationships they create in the story, the musical notes and rests they faithfully play in the Gospel of Love Is the Touch.

Let us sing together the first verse of the hymn, Love Is the Touch (MV 89):

**Love is the touch of intangible joy;
love is the force that no fear can destroy;
love is the goodness we gladly applaud:
God is where love is, for love is of God.**

The stage is set at a meal. Throughout history, the main act of Christian worship has been a meal. The meal in today's story takes place just before Jesus goes into Jerusalem, which we will be witnessing next week. This is a friend-filled meal in which Jesus, along with some of his closest disciples, is invited to dine at the house of Martha, in Bethany. It is the same house in which Martha does the chores of a host while her sister, Mary, sits at the feet of Jesus. Today's dinner happens some time after Lazarus has been raised from the tomb. And on this day, Mary does an unexpected thing: she anoints the feet of Jesus with a very expensive perfume - - the equivalent of a year's wages for an average worker — and then wipes his feet clean with her hair. Why?

John, the author of the Gospel, says, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." It displays quite a contrast to what happened just months, or even weeks

before. Remember that in the earlier passage, when Lazarus died and Jesus was four days late to see him, Mary and Martha cried, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the townspeople who came with her also weeping, Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, and himself began to weep. Then, Jesus said, “Take away the stone,” of the tomb, and Martha said, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

**Love is the touch of intangible joy;
love is the force that no fear can destroy;**

Mary anoints Jesus’s feet, with the fragrant ointment, and wipes them with her hair: This is the musical note, the relationship knot; the bond is the “touch,” in particular, love’s touch born out of the intangible joy Mary and Jesus (and others) share. It is an act that counters the fear of the power of death. What is interesting to me is that these are Jesus’ feet. Other Gospel writers noted that Jesus’ head was anointed with this precious perfume — understood to be a sign of Jesus’ kingship, his royalty. Anointing feet is different: Mary understands what this time means for Jesus, for her, for the community of disciples that are sharing this meal. This gentle, tender wiping of the feet reminds me of the practice of anointing the body before burial. At that time, this practice often began with anointing the hands and the feet - - before the rest of the body was prepared. The hands and the feet — those places where often the signs of death can first be felt. Then, the hands and the feet are the same parts of us which often first meet the world while alive: we touch, move, make knots, walk on paths both familiar and unknown, with our hands and feet! Mary has already seen death, then the promise of God literally coming alive in the wonder of Jesus bringing her brother, Lazarus, back to life.

Love is the force that no fear can destroy;

Let’s stay a little longer with this powerful symbolism of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus. We remember the command to Moses to take off his shoes, for his feet were standing on holy ground. I am aware that for many of us, our feet ground us — they are where, every morning, we first physically meet this world God has made. The act of taking off one’s shoes may be not just a sign of respect but also a way in which we come closer to the ground, “the holy” itself. A commentator suggests, here, if Mary is also recognizing this, by anointing his feet, that in his living, Jesus was as grounded as the rest of us. And that in being so ‘grounded’, he made all of himself, and all of us, somehow holy, too. Utter humanity. We all need, at some point, someone, God, to ground us from our fear.

Peter, could you play the second verse from Love Is the Touch for us?

**Love is the lilt in a lingering voice;
love is the hope that can make us rejoice;
love is the cure for the frightened and flawed:
God is where love is, for love is of God.**

In today's Gospel theatre, there's one more prominent actor, and he sings his part of Jesus' redemptive history: Judas Iscariot, who will soon betray his master / friend. He criticizes Mary's anointing as an unnecessary waste of what could have been put to better use by feeding the poor. The author of the Gospel explains that Judas does not say this out of concern for the poor, but rather because he is a thief and covets money.

Nancy Rockwell explains this in her article in patheos.com, "The legends of Judas are burned into the story of Holy Week unforgettably. Over the centuries their meaning has changed, along with the imagery associated with the Betrayer of Christ. More than any other figure, Judas is the repository of Christian anti-Semitism, the fire that has flamed out in acts of cruelty for centuries and came to its fullness in the Holocaust... For a thousand years, from c. 900 to the mid-1900s, Holy Week was a dreaded time among Jews, a time when gangs of drunken Christian men could wage terror as an act of piety in Jewish towns in eastern Europe and in Jewish ghettos in western Europe, and there would be no censure of their violence. Christians, who were fasting and attending rituals on many days of this week, were being fed, in art and in sermons, permission to hate Judas and to blame Judas, and therefore the Jews, for the death of Christ."

**Love is the hope that can make us rejoice;
love is the cure for the frightened and flawed:**

When I read today's reading, and encounter Mary and Judas again, especially verse by verse, from the Gospel reading and singing the hymn, Love is the Touch, I could find the parallels between Mary and Judas and what they might represent in light of "Divisions during Covid (this Sunday's theme)."

Mary's anointing, especially her touch on the feet of Jesus, reminds us of our hunger for connection; our hope to emerge, an emancipation from the distance and separation, caused by our shared Covid reality, and anoint one another, with blessings of touch: Sharing meals, consoling those who are fearful, grounding us in peace and the assurance of peace.

On the other hand, Judas (especially Christianity's depiction of him) can remind us of our sin, i.e. racism, anti-Semitism. Of course, as an individual disciple, Judas is deeply

flawed. He might not have felt concern for the poor as much as scorn for Mary's gesture. Judas might have just used the idea of 'the poor' as a means to an end, co-opting the language of solidarity to make Mary look foolish. However, we might also see a parallel here, even if dimly: after more than two years of the pandemic, most people believe their society is now more divided than before the pandemic, (according to a Pew Research Center survey in 17 advanced economies) and those who say the current economic situation is bad are more likely to say their society is more divided.

**Love is the hope that can make us rejoice;
love is the cure for the frightened and flawed:**

Verse 4: "But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?'. Jesus said, '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.'"

It is important to remember that Jesus' response "The poor will always be with you" is not intended to normalize poverty, or to say that poverty is an eternal, intractable problem, which would reduce the justice work of eradicating poverty to occasional, convenient philanthropy. His response is a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11, "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 neighbour in your land.'"

Now, would you like to sing the third verse of the hymn, Love is the Touch, with me?

**Love is the light in the tunnel of pain;
love is the will to be whole once again;
love is the trust of a friend on the road:
God is where love is, for love is of God.**

This morning, I appreciate the opportunity to sing the hymn and think about love as a touch, as an antidote to the foremost pain of the pandemic: separation. I see that separation is a unique aspect of the division brought about through Covid. I have tried to visualize this distance, this separation, this division, by reflecting on Mary and Jesus - and Judas, with singing the hymn, Love is the Touch.

Now, I invite you to sing the last verse as we conclude today's reflection. May the messages and assurance in Love Is the Touch be our hymnal for the pandemic.

Love is the touch of intangible joy;

love is the force that no fear can destroy;

love is the hope that can make us rejoice;
love is the cure for the frightened and flawed:

Love is the light in the tunnel of pain;
love is the will to be whole once again;

The fourth verse:

**Love is the Maker and Spirit and Son;
love is the kingdom their will has begun;
love is the path which the saints all have trod:
God is where love is, for love is of God.**

May these words console us and raise us up to live, move, and touch to be a blessing.
Let us anoint one another and praise our Creator who walks with us,
God's hands and feet warmly held by ours,
in life, in death, and life beyond death.

Offering

Prayers of the People:

God of Love,

We celebrate your presence in the hopes and signs of the spring around us.
Even though on the surface of the earth, we still see the deep cover of the snow in many
places, wild animals and trees have already noticed the change and show us it is a new
season again. Trembling Aspen trees, wild plum trees, put forth their bright gray fluffy
new buds and announce their news! "Behold", God says, "I make all things new!"

We are living with threats of going nuclear.
Refugees are on the move,
And divisions and polarities add to the feeling of scarcity and isolation.

And yet, you still speak to us through Word Made Flesh, Jesus, with all creation on
earth, the body of Christ, and so, into the heart of our trembling self. "Praise and pray,
people of God":

Love is the touch of intangible joy;
love is the force that no fear can destroy;

love is the hope that can make us rejoice;
love is the cure for the frightened and flawed:

Love is the light in the tunnel of pain;
love is the will to be whole once again;

Just as Mary open a bottle of costly perfume and fill the house with fragrance and beauty, generosity and love, help us anoint our beloved people, neighbours, your children, with good things that heal the hurts and calm anxiety.

Your creation is filled with such blessing — the first signs of spring, foxes roaming and geese returning, the fresh smell of snow melting and new buds showing, more birds singing... flying...

Today, we especially pray for people who bless one another...
The spirit of giving from donors,
a heart-to-heart silent conversation at a loved one's end,
tears of grief and missing those who are so dear to us...

In a weary world, your gospel anoints us — reminding us to give thanks for all that anoints us, for it is more than time to remember these gifts...

Especially we remember this morning the Residential School survivors and Elders who have sought this day, worked for this day, prayed for this day and made this day to happen to hear the apology directly from the Pope. There are more days that still need to come for healing, for reconciliation, for reparation, for the lands, when the words of apology do not end as they are now but the deep repentance becomes the seeds and the signs of the transformed, new, Spring of full joy for all peoples of the Creator.

Hymn: VU 166 *Joy Comes with the Dawn*

Commissioning and Benediction:

Let us go from here to ask ourselves:
Who can we anoint with the fragrance of our faith?

Amen