

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

It feels like Spring! Now for many people the coming of spring brings a return to yard work, getting lawn mowers and weed-whackers ready, even digging a garden, maybe even two gardens if you raise veggies as well as flowers. When Cynthia and I lived in southern Minnesota Cynthia had a garden. I did the digging, the preparing of the soil, she did everything else. So with the idea that spring is here, let's prepare the soil a bit.

Let me draw your attention to our Isaiah lesson for a few moments. We have a reminder of God bringing Israel out of Egypt, maybe addressed to the exiles before they left Babylon, maybe addressed to those who were returning to Jerusalem. God tells them not to "remember the former things or the things of old," because he is about to do a new thing, which springs forth, a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. Now think about this, God is telling his people the past is behind you, and the future holds an even greater deliverance. God will make a "way in the wilderness" and there will be "rivers in the desert."

God has indeed done a new thing and you and I receive the blessing of this new thing, this river of "living water" called Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the way in the wilderness of just plain living, who gives us water in the deserts of our lives. And this brings me to our second lesson, from Paul's letter to the Philippians. There are several thoughts here I commend to you. First, Paul is presenting his bona fides so to speak, if anyone has reason to be confident about things, it is him, Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, indeed one who persecuted the church, blameless under the law. Now "blameless under the law" isn't the same thing as earning your salvation by your own efforts or merits. It means more obeying the letter of the law rather than the sense of the law. Think of the stoning to death of Stephen, or dragging Christians out of their homes, not really what one would call neighbor love as talked about in the Old Testament.

But whatever Paul's bona fides, whatever he has done or accomplished on his own, he counts as rubbish. He counts it all as rubbish because of Christ, because of knowing Christ, noting that he has no righteousness of his own, but that which comes through faith in Christ. And catch this! He presses on to make this salvation his own because Christ Jesus has made him his own. Brothers and sisters, Christ Jesus has made you, and me, his own. Paul forgets what lies behind and strains forward to the future, for the "heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul is telling us that he has emptied himself of all, of everything because of Christ Jesus, because of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection, the sharing of his suffering and becoming like him in his death.

Christ's suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, believers saved by faith, not by works of the law, talk about a new thing springing forth! Talk about a renewal of life as happens in Spring of the year!

So now we find ourselves in Bethany, not too long before the Passover. All four of our gospels have accounts of this anointing of Jesus with perfume. Luke is the most dissimilar from John's account, while Matthew and Mark are somewhat similar. The perfume that was poured over Jesus' feet would have cost the equivalent of a years wage for the average laborer, figuring a denarii a day, not working the Sabbath or festival days. It's expensive stuff!

Waste of money that could have been better spent? Let's talk about this. Whether Judas has ulterior motives or not, his comment about the poor, taken at face value, has merit. But there is something else here that commands my attention. Taking the three lessons together, a new way, Christ's resurrection and death, salvation by faith, Paul emptying himself of all save Christ, now this gospel story of Mary pouring out in a literal fashion an incredibly extravagant gift, anointing Jesus as though he were already dead, pouring it on his feet while serving him in an act of utter humility as the most common slave. Perfume poured out leaving an empty container, Mary humbling herself in violation of every norm of the society, respectable women always had their hair bound up and covered in the company of those not family, no one but a slave washed the feet of another, and only small amounts of perfume or oil were used to anoint the heads, not the feet of honored guests. Opened and offered.

Do you remember Jesus telling us that what we do for the least of our brethren, we do for him? Whether clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, offering a cup of water. Jesus, the new thing, pours himself out for you and me, not only by his death on the cross, but also in the sacrament of the table. Jesus the new thing offers himself as living water, not only in our baptisms, but in that all who believe in him will have eternal life. Opened, offered, poured out. Poured out for us.

Then we, like Paul are to offer ourselves, to empty ourselves, maybe we don't do it the way Paul did, sharing the gospel while earning his living as an itinerant tent-maker, but we are to serve, to give, to do both extravagantly! Opening ourselves up, emptying ourselves of all but Christ, loving God and loving neighbor as ourselves. Not to earn salvation, not for any form of recognition, but because Christ loves us extravagantly, because Mary and Paul poured themselves out extravagantly. We are to do it because we want to love God, love others, even as Christ loves us, without counting the cost, not wondering if our gift is too big, to extravagant.

God showed his love for us when his only Son poured himself out for us, sinners though we are. True love, opened offered, received and used! A gift from love, a gift of love, and what can we give in return? Only ourselves as extravagantly as we are able, and this is what we do when our hearts overflow with love, when we serve as Mary served, when we serve as the Apostle Paul served. When our hearts overflow with love and we leave it at the feet of Jesus.

AMEN

