

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, March 13, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Philippians 3:4b-14; Psalm 126; John 12:1-8
“Choosing what matters”

In some ways, it's about the cost/benefit ratio. They are very closely connected, almost inseparable, in fact. Receiving - and giving up. Gain - and loss. Choosing one thing - and not choosing something else. In order to have this - we must lose that. The joy of getting - tempered by the sadness of losing.

Usually, the joy of getting is greater than the sadness of losing. The gain outweighs the loss. What we receive compensates for what we give up. The benefit more than makes up for the cost. And the end result is joy, happiness, satisfaction, contentment. If sometimes tinged with a sense of grief, sadness, dissatisfaction, discontentment.

These not particularly profound thoughts came to me as I read the texts for this morning, especially the passages from Philippians and St John's Gospel. For they both contain gain and loss. We see that most clearly in the Philippians passage, of course. Here Paul is deliberately and very clearly writing about what he has lost and what he has gained.

What has he lost? Well, his status in his religious community, for one thing. His standing among the purest of the pure of his religious tradition, for another. A noble, proud, distinguished heritage that others may well have envied. The respect and the admiration of his contemporaries for his zeal and commitment. A reputation as a hard-liner. The right to claim, boldly and unashamedly and with no fear that anyone would think of challenging him, that he was blameless as to righteousness under the law.

All of this, he has given up. All of this he has lost. All of this he no longer values or treasures or places any confidence in. In fact, he says that for the sake of *the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ... I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish* Philippians 3:8.

Now the Greek word Paul uses here is σκουβαλον - skubalon. The New Revised Standard Version translates it as *rubbish*. The New English Bible says *garbage*. The King James Version is either the least delicate and refined, or it simply may be the most accurate and earthy translation of all. The word it uses is *dung*. And to be fair, the footnote in the New Revised Standard Version suggests as an alternate translation *excrement*.

If that is what Paul has lost, what has he gained? Paul had absolutely no doubt about what he had gained. In fact, he has to use several phrases to express all that he has gained: the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord; gaining Christ and being found in him; having a righteousness that is not his own but one that comes from God through faith in Christ; knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection; becoming like him in his death; attaining the resurrection from the dead.

All these - which are maybe all the same thing in the end - are so important, so precious, so valuable to Paul, that everything else he once had was utterly worthless by comparison. No question in Paul's mind and heart about the cost/benefit ratio.

But I can't help wondering how shocking his words must have sounded to his readers, certainly to Jews, but maybe just as much to the Christians to whom he wrote.

And Mary. How shocking her actions must have appeared to those who witnessed her taking a pound

of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointing Jesus' feet, and wiping his feet with her hair.

It was bad enough that Jesus, a religious leader and teacher, a rabbi, allowed a woman to touch him. It was bad enough that she should perform what may have been a more intimate task that we realise for a man who was not her husband. It was bad enough that she did it in public, at least as public as a gathering round the table in a house could possibly be.

But the way John tells it, what really got to Judas was the sheer wastefulness of it all. It was a pound of costly perfume, made of pure nard, no less, that had been imported all the way from the Himalayas. Enough of it that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. It was worth the equivalent of what a working man would earn in a year. And it was all poured over one man's feet. Such extravagance, such waste, when it could have been sold to raise money for the poor.

There is no question that Mary gave up something. Something that would have cost her a great deal of money. Something that could have brought her much pleasure, if she had chosen to keep it to herself. But she had a choice. And she chose to give it up in order to do something special for someone who had clearly come to mean a great deal to her.

I wonder: did she expect the reaction her action got? John says that Judas criticized her for it, and goes on to use the incident as an opportunity to take a swing at Judas and accuse him of being a thief who helped himself from the common purse. Matthew, when he tells the story, says that it was the disciples who were angry at her - Matthew 26:8. And Mark says just that it was *some who were there* - Mark 14:4.

Whichever account you follow, Mary paid a greater cost than the merely financial one: part of what her tender act cost her was the criticism she received from others. From people who might have been expected to understand what she did and why she did it. And as Matthew records Jesus saying in his account of the incident, *'Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her'* Matthew 26:13

I was struck by what H Stephen Shoemaker writes in his commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*.

There was a sumptuousness about (Mary's) sacrifice that is true of all saints - a surprising excessiveness in their compassion and generosity. So Mary, counting no cost, anointed Jesus

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Mary's act came and comes in the midst of a world of treachery and betrayal, in the world and among Jesus' followers.

We live our lives in the shadow of the cross, but we also live in the presence of the risen Christ. So here is an invitation to daily companionship with Jesus, at the Table, in extravagant acts of compassion and generosity, in moments of worship. All this in a world which lives by a mind-set of scarcity, rather than a mind-set of abundance, and so tempts us to close in and give little. All this in a world whose violence and cruelty crucify people every day.