

5 Lent

March 13, 2016

Rev Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's

Isaiah 43:16-21

I am about to do a new thing

Philippians 3:4b-14

Nothing that happened in the past can equal what God has done through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

John 12:1-8

Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet

Ruth protected Candace from a tripping fall on a broken sidewalk hidden in the sand. Her elbow took the full force, protecting Candace from the impact of the fall. She had a deep scar for years. What an example of instinct motivated by love.

Shaun Cunningham attended a Pirates-Braves spring training game last Sunday in Kissimmee, Florida. He brought with him his eight year old son, Landon. Pirates player Danny Ortiz lost his grip on the bat, sending it flying into the grandstands toward Landon. His dad deflected the bat with his arm, protecting his son from a direct hit to the head by that flying bat. He didn't have to think; it was an instinctive move, motivated by love.

My mother, diagnosed with breast cancer, went through several surgeries; then radiation; then was sent to Roswell Park Memorial in Buffalo. The only hope left was experimental surgery to remove her adrenal gland, believing that somehow adrenalin helped cancer to grow. I drove from my home in Erie, Pa to Buffalo, and sat with her as she waited to be taken to surgery. I tried to comfort her, 'you'll be okay, mom.' She said, 'I've had a lot of surgeries. I'm doing this for you kids, not for me.' This is the extravagant love that my mom had for her family.

Extravagant Love shows itself all around us in life; and it transforms life when it happens.

Mary of Bethany was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This was the Lazarus whom Jesus called out from the grave, and gave back his life. Imagine the depth of gratitude that Mary held for Jesus. This is the same Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus when he had visited their home for dinner. She sat and carefully listened to every word he said, while Martha was busy in the kitchen, preparing the meal.

On another visit to their home, just six days before Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover, something motivated her to take a jar of very, very expensive perfumed ointment, to anoint his feet, and then wipe his feet with her hair. When Judas condemned her for wasting something of so much value, Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Some commentators have said that she anointed Jesus to prepare him for his death that would happen in just six days. That story doesn't make sense to me. I think Mary must have wondered why Jesus said anything about preparing for his burial. His twelve closest friends had not been able to understand that Jesus was going to die. It seems more likely that she would have said, 'No. I bought it because you were coming and I wanted to give you something beautiful and heartfelt.' Isn't it more likely that she felt so close to Jesus, so grateful that he was a friend, so overwhelmed by his extravagant love for Lazarus, and for all those she had heard about him healing, that it was instinctive to show her gratitude? This was the best she had; the

best she could do to somehow respond to the gift of extravagant love she felt from his presence.

The prophet Isaiah knew that God was arranging for Israel's return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. God said through Isaiah, 'I am about to do a new thing.' Their return to the land that had been promised to them by God was filled with the grace of God's extravagant love.

Paul said that nothing that happened in the past can equal what God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul knew that because of this, his life was transformed. Nothing else mattered to him.

(Peter Balabanski) "You could read Paul in a way that makes you think that he is driven by remorse for what he once was; (a Pharisee, the one who held the coat of Stephen as he was stoned, the one who hunted down Christians – ed). But that is not what he is saying. Paul senses that Jesus has claimed him as his own, and he is stunned with GRATITUDE. So every bit of energy Paul expends; every struggle is because of Jesus' grace to him. He is not looking behind; he is looking forward... driven by his own personal experience of grace; pure, unexpected, unearned, outrageous grace.

"Outrageous grace demands an extravagant response; that is just what Mary did; that is Paul's journey."

In a way I think Lent has a bad reputation; being a time to try one more time to stick to the resolutions we were not able to keep last New Years. This season is not ultimately about remorse or guilt. It is about finding or re-discovering the gratitude that is the instinctive response from us for the extravagant love Jesus has for each of us, and for his instinctive response.

Then, next, how will we respond to this extravagant love that Jesus was willing to die for, to show us? How does this gift transform us? How can we encourage this gift to thrive in us, and shine out from us so that people around us can see it and feel it?

When I see Ruth protect our daughter Candace, and my mother go into another surgery for our sake, and Jesus go to the cross to express the depth of his love; when I see these signs and examples of extravagant love happen around me, it transforms me. It gives me hope, and it inspires me to reach higher in my own life.

The power of God's love for each of us should shape the reflections, the prayers, the awareness, and the commitment that enrich our journey to the end of Lent, and transform us. We can share in Paul's words that are inspired by his overflow of gratitude; "Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back." (MSG)

Amen.