

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

On Thursday I went to Walmart to buy something I couldn't find anywhere else, and the first thing I saw was a sign that said "seventeen days till Easter." Now that's fourteen days till Easter. Two weeks from today we'll be here celebrating the resurrection of our Lord. I feel kind of like I did when it was two weeks before Christmas and I hadn't procured that special toy for my child who wanted nothing else. You know what I mean. It's only two weeks, but we have a lot of ground to cover between now and March 27, and it may not be an easy journey, depending on how you plan to travel it.

In Lent of 2004, Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," was released and viewed by Christians across the world who were walking with Jesus on the road to the cross. When a group from our church decided to go together to see it, I jumped at the chance. My sweet husband did not; in fact he adamantly refused to go. Despite his ability to sit and watch blood, gore, and violence for hours on television, he simply could not bear the thought of watching an enactment of our Lord's passion. I, on the other hand, could not imagine *not* going. Despite my normal tendency to leave the room at the first hint of video violence, I wanted, needed even, to see those terrible things our Lord endured before and during his crucifixion. Each of us relates to the reality of our Lord's suffering in different ways, and that is our choice, but if we are to fully appreciate and celebrate the Day of Resurrection, we must first engage ourselves in some significant way in the truth of what our Lord experienced.

Using our Savior's own words, today I invite you to take up your cross and follow Christ very intentionally for the next couple of weeks. Next Sunday we'll begin the journey in earnest with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But remember that we've been hearing him talk about Jerusalem for some time, and in today's familiar story from John's Gospel, we find him stopping at the home of his friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, in Bethany, only two miles from Jerusalem. Six days after his visit to them, Jews everywhere will be celebrating the Passover, and many observant Jewish men are traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. Bethany is a convenient stop for Jesus and the disciples, and the occasion could very likely be more than a simple celebration in Jesus' honor; it could be a way for Lazarus and his sisters to thank Jesus for raising Lazarus from the dead.

The Gospel tells us that Martha served at the dinner and Lazarus was at the table with the other men when Mary took a pound of expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet. A pound of perfume of any kind would go a long, long way, even after it was wiped away. And Mary used her hair instead of a cloth, so the house was saturated with the scent of it as she went from room to room and it likely lingered for quite a long time.

There are a couple of trains of thought about Mary's act and the reasons for it. One is that it was an act of adoration, of the pure love and devotion Mary felt for Jesus. If this was purely about love, we can only imagine what the other men at the table were thinking as they watched. We'll get to Judas in a moment, but for now, I wonder about Lazarus and the disciples. How did they respond? Were they supportive of Mary? Or were they shocked and embarrassed at a very public display of affection? Whatever they were thinking doesn't seem to matter to Mary. Her feelings for Jesus are no mystery to anyone in any of the stories we hear about her.

The other possible reason for Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is that she is symbolically beginning the preparation of her Lord's body for burial. Jesus himself affirms this possibility by saying to Judas, that "she bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Perhaps Mary has not only heard, but has taken very seriously his words about his impending death; perhaps she

believes what he has said and wants to honor him in life as she would in death—by letting him know how much she loves him while she can.

For just a moment, let's put aside what we know about Judas' betrayal of Jesus, and even what the Gospel tells us today—that he was a thief who stole from the common purse. I wonder if the disciples knew that about him at the time of this incident. Surely not! Surely they would have done something about it if they had known! So let's just assume they haven't started to figure out just how despicable he is. If they didn't know his motives, his statement about giving to the poor might have found agreement with some of the others. What Judas said made sense; Mary's act of extravagance did not. Fortunately we don't have to ask who was right. Jesus makes that very clear. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Love and devotion to Christ gives meaning to taking care of the poor and everything else Jesus asked of his followers.

In our Lenten study of Mike Slaughter's book, *The Rebel Jesus*, we've been talking about who Jesus is to us and how we are called to follow him. As Christians, we often carry with us this image of Jesus as we saw in children's bibles or on the walls of Sunday school buildings, as a handsome, gentle man who loves us and simply wants us to love him back. Maybe that's how we see him in today's Gospel lesson, as a man who is easy to follow. We've convinced ourselves that all we have to do is attend church, give to the needy, say our prayers, read and study the bible, choose how committed we want to be, and then, Bingo! We're in! But of course it's not that simple. The Way of the Cross requires more of us. Much more.

In last week's chapter of *The Rebel Jesus*, Slaughter presented two contradictory ways of following Jesus that really stuck in my mind: we can be servants, or we can be volunteers. There are numerous differences between them, demonstrated in the choices we make, in the ways we prioritize our commitments, the true nature of our actions and words, and, of course, in the ways our hearts lead us to live as Jesus taught us, in ways that are pleasing to God. Perhaps we can use Mary of Bethany and Judas Iscariot to help us understand how to live as servants rather than as volunteers. Through them today, we see two very different examples of following Christ: a generous woman who adores him, who puts being with him before anything else, and a man for whom following his teachings is an end, not the means to an end. We're given a glimpse of their hearts and what is held in them. That's where it begins for us, too, isn't it? In our hearts.

Our collect today asks God to fix our hearts where true joy is to be found: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Maybe we just need to stop being so practical and start practicing more love.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks
for all your goodness and loving-kindness
to us and to all whom you have made.
We bless you for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your immeasurable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ;
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies,
that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives,
by giving up our selves to your service,
and by walking before you
in holiness and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory throughout all ages.

Amen.