

## Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent Year C

[RCL] Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8; Psalm 126

Realistic. Practical. Sensible. Those are words we all like to use to describe ourselves and our churches. We are Christians who believe in an amazing story of death and resurrection, but in the end we have to come back down to earth and live in the real world. Someone has to make sure the budget balances.

This is exactly the attitude of Judas in our gospel story today, the attitude Jesus condemns.

We don't normally think of ourselves in the same category with Judas. And a great deal of the time, those practical considerations do need to guide our behavior as individuals and communities.

But Jesus profoundly values Mary and her gesture in this gospel. He finds her pouring of fragrant oil over his feet and wiping them with her hair deeply meaningful, and he will not allow this beautiful, intimate moment to be ruined by the mean-spirited practicality of Judas.

What makes Judas even more blameworthy – and even more of a warning to us – is that he overlays his criticism of Mary with a virtuous moral justification. “We could have used that money to serve the poor!” He laments with outward heartfelt piety and inward smug self-righteousness. Have you ever seen this happen at church? Someone takes the moral high ground, not out of love but because it places them in a position to score points on someone else. “I’m more Christian than you are,” is a game that has no winners.

Jesus saw this and Jesus cuts right through Judas’ posturing. In this moment, Mary and her gesture mean more than Judas and his proposed action. That’s hard for us action-oriented Americans to take! All the beautiful gestures in the world won’t get the pledge campaign launched or the nave vacuumed or the food pantry stocked.

Or will they? Why does Jesus value Mary’s extravagant and loving but essentially useless gesture so much? Because the things that inspire us to greatness are often exactly that: useless gestures. Here’s an example of that phenomenon.

In June of 1941, Dmitri Shostakovich was a successful composer and the head of the Leningrad Conservatory’s piano department. He and millions of others were suddenly uprooted by the surprise bombardment of Leningrad by German forces, breaking the non-aggression pact Hitler had signed with Russia and beginning a siege that would last almost two and a half years. Although Shostakovich was evacuated, his heart remained with his besieged city, and he began writing what would become the defining work of his career. His massive Seventh Symphony began to take shape, music that told the story of war and sacrifice and heroism, inspired by and dedicated to Leningrad.

The siege wore on through the terrible winter of 1941. Once the starving residents had eaten all the dogs, cats, and rats in the city, they moved on to leather handbags and suitcases. By January 1942, they were subsisting on wallpaper paste and sawdust. Thousands of frozen, starved bodies littered the streets every day, and the survivors, barely clinging to life, soon no longer had the physical strength to clear the corpses away. The death toll climbed to 1.2 million.

In February, Shostakovich finished the symphony, and it premiered to worldwide acclaim in Moscow, London, and New York. But Shostakovich knew that the true premiere had not happened yet. The Leningrad Symphony, to truly come to life, had to be played in Leningrad.

The sheet music was smuggled into the city across German lines. Leningrad's premiere orchestra, the Philharmonic, had been evacuated before the siege closed in, and the leftover Radiokom orchestra was all that remained. Of their ranks, 70 had frozen or starved to death in the siege, and only 20 were left alive. And yet, rehearsals began.

The musicians were utterly physically debilitated. They barely had the strength to lift their instruments, and rehearsals, limited to 15 minute intervals, were frequently punctuated by orchestra members fainting from hunger or cold. In fact, they never had the physical strength to play the entire symphony through at once until the actual performance.

In one incredible episode, a percussionist was reported dead, and the conductor, who needed him desperately for the symphony, went to the morgue to check. He saw movement in one stack of corpses, and it was his percussionist, still alive but too weak to protest being carted off with the dead. The conductor rescued him and he went on to play in the performance.

On August 9, 1942, the cobbled together starving orchestra in Leningrad performed the entire Symphony Number 7 for their audience of emaciated but defiant fellow citizens in an epic triumph of the human spirit. This was the exact date Hitler had boasted he would have a victory dinner in the Hotel Astoria to celebrate conquering Leningrad.

The symphony played by the starving orchestra – this is essentially a useless gesture. It did not shorten the siege or provide any food or help defeat the Nazi forces. In fact, three musicians in the orchestra died during the rehearsal period, their lives undoubtedly shortened by having exerted themselves physically to play.

But this useless gesture helped a city beaten down almost to death hold on long enough to be liberated. And we have to wonder if Mary's useless gesture in our gospel story today functioned in the same way. This was Jesus' farewell dinner with Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. He knew he was going to his death, and he knew it would not be an easy death.

Mary would soon face the grief of losing her beloved teacher and friend to an unjust, violent execution. They both had ordeals before them that were on par with or even exceeded what the besieged citizens of Leningrad underwent.

All of us, while perhaps not driven to the extremes that Jesus, Mary, and the Leningraders were, have faced times in our lives where our bodies, minds, and spirits are pushed far beyond what we

think we can endure. Sitting by the bedside of a loved one as she slowly succumbs to cancer. Bearing the pain of a spouse with dementia no longer recognizing us. The moment when we hear that our child has been in a terrible car accident. Battling through the pain of a chronic illness or debilitating injury that renders our own bodies deaf to our commands and consumed with pain. These moments when comfort and reason and relief seem like bizarre and foreign concepts happen to all of us. And what gets us through those moments? Is it the moral pontification of Judas, the building up of our virtuous self-image through studiously practical good works?

No. What helps us survive is the useless gesture, the impractical moment, the unfiltered communication of love and joy and hope that we remember with photographic clarity – the first time our baby smiled at us, the look on our spouse’s face when we exchanged our vows, the warm arms of a parent or grandparent around us as a child. These small moments of devotion between people who love each other – these useless gestures – they are what sustain our courage when the chips are down, and that is what we see between Jesus and Mary in the gospel.

Because even the great inspiring moments of life, like the Leningrad performance of the 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony, are made up of a thousand small actions. The moment that inspired a city to triumph over fascism was built by one violinist raising his violin to his shoulder and mentally begging his trembling fingers to find the notes, by one trumpeter fighting through the lightheadedness that swamped him every time he drew breath deep enough to play, by one percussionist beating out the rhythm that echoed his own heartbeat that everyone else thought was extinguished.

These are gestures made of love. They are the hearts and spirits of musicians giving the feeble strength of their bodies for their city. And as they gave themselves to create the music, in their minds they didn’t see a vast metropolis. They saw the faces of their children, their parents, their wives and husbands.

When Jesus surrendered himself to the authorities, he did not see the broad sweep of the cosmos he was about to die to save. He saw your face.

So ask yourself: have you made an impractical gesture of love today? Have you done something useless that has no other value than to give of yourself to another? Search for that chance to make that useless gesture of love, because somewhere down the road, it may save someone’s life.

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