

John 12:1-8 The Way Things Are
Philippians 3:4b-14

The telling of the gospel is a speaking of the truth about the way things are (Frederick Buechner again). I read that about thirty years ago and it has worked on me ever since and become a part of a foundational ideas about preaching. So it is also a confession.

It is not a scientific or a philosophical, or economic or even a historical or a political telling of the truth even though it may sometimes have implications for all these things and more besides. It could be a theological telling of truth, although even that word has some unintended luggage, not about the way things could be, or should be, but the way things are.

Think of the preaching of the Christian faith as a way of helping ourselves and others understand what it means to be a human being. Part of the reason we come here each week is to hear and speak variations on this truth because it can't be explained fully by any to the expressions of which human beings are capable. If you ask a chemist the same question you will get an answer about the chemicals and reactions that characterize physical life, but that is not the answer you are looking for.

“My ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts,” we learn from Isaiah. The bible speaks in stories, metaphors and similes, in propositions and hymns, poems as well as parables. It is always telling about the way things are.

In the text from Philippians. Paul tells about his standing in the world in terms that are meaningful to him, even it they are not to us. He was a, “Hebrew of Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin.” He claims to have been blameless in the way he practiced Jewish law. He was a Pharisee. He even offers the persecution of Christians as evidence of his zeal.

There are two ways people often speak about meaning; family and vocation. Paul expresses both of these in terms of his Jewish heritage. We are also given to do the same; we are Irish or German, American, mostly Christian; and we are teachers and accountants and plumbers and electricians, and the like. Meaning is found in what we inherit and what we do.

But then he changes course by saying that it is all worthless. He uses a vulgar term that is often translated, “garbage.” He has found, “in Christ,” a source of meaning that renders other sources of meaning powerless and irrelevant. Whatever is meaningful to us is real, but not ultimate.

He has found that we are all human beings in relation to God, and for Paul, and millions besides, this level of meaning rises all others. Family and vocation are not without meaning, but they cannot fill the void in each of us. Only a life in relation to God can do that. The gospel presses us to think about eternal sources of meaning rather than the temporal or earthly. That is the way things are.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he addressed an aspect of our common humanity that everyone shares. We call it mortality and it too is a part of the way things are. Not only does everyone die, but none chose to live in the first place, nor has more than a little control over the circumstances.

So when the sister of Lazarus, Mary, came along with expensive perfume and washed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair, it was meant to point beyond itself to a larger truth. And she also raises one of the other aspects about life, the one we call morality, which is also a part of the way things are.

Nard is expensive and the money could be better spent. On earth, there are people like Judas to remind us about this aspect of life, he himself was the treasurer and slight though the income was, he was skimming a little off the top for himself and so had an interest in both the income and the spending of the group. On earth some people spend extravagantly, others complain about it, others skim some off the top. We cannot escape these considerations.

For the Gospel of John, there are always two levels of meaning. In the eternal realm, the raising of Lazarus was a foreshadowing of the resurrection of the dead, as was Mary was anointing Jesus. Her act, intimate almost to the point of embarrassment though it was, had a higher meaning and Jesus understood it.

We are forced to think on both levels of meaning; the mundane everyday level where there is poverty that

doesn't seem to be solvable and where some spend extravagantly while other skim a little off the top for private use, and there are daily tasks to be done.

We find ourselves fighting pandemics, and rogue actors starting wars they shouldn't start, and the everyday tasks can be overwhelming, sometimes with such delight that we get lost in them and other times with burdens that threaten to break us, and sometimes they bore us to tears.

And the eternal world of meaning where everything is right and death is conquered by life so that it is not the end but a passage to a greater reality; and where mercy conquers judgment and meaning meaningless. The reality of the transcendent compels us to ply it for implications:

One of the words we use to speak of these implications is love, of God and neighbor and enemy, and not the kind of love we mean when we say we love pizza or ice cream, but the kind Jesus meant when he said, "there is no greater love than for a person to lay down his life for a friend."

Which raises another word of implication, sacrifice, also a Lenten word: think not only of oneself, but also of others. Give precedence to the larger community over the individual. Have faith in the triumph of resurrection, mercy and meaning . . . because these are truths not about the way things could be, or even should be, but the way things are.

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