

Loving More, Judging Less
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 12:1-8
14 March 2021
sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae

“Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.”

Have you ever experienced total darkness? There are caves in the American southwest that can be visited with a trained guide. When you have descended to a certain level the guide turns off his head lamp and you experience total darkness. It is an odd experience because it is something totally new. You never realize how much light is really seeping into what we perceive as darkness until you experience a deep cave. Think about it, whenever you turn off the lights at night before bed, for a few moments you think you are in total darkness but it doesn't take long before your eyes begin to adjust and you start to make out shapes around you. The room begins to look familiar again. But in total darkness no light is ever coming in, no starlight, no moonlight, no sunlight, nothing. Ever. Your eyes never adjust and you can see nothing. Fortunately such places are rare; in our everyday living there is always some light, no matter how tiny or how faint that seeps into the darkness and helps our eyes to adjust. Even when that darkness is metaphorical.

“Once you were darkness but now in the Lord you are light.”

This section of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was written to help members of the early church prepare for their baptisms, to help them understand how their life would be different as part of a faith community, and what was expected of them. Paul does this by describing them as light. With Christ’s love in our lives it is like moving from total darkness to light and that light takes hold in our hearts and we carry it with us everywhere. It helps us find our bearings and also must be shared, to help guide the way for others. And how does that happen? By our actions and our response in the world.

Responding to God’s love through our actions is a really important part of living out our faith, and our gospel lesson today shows that just as there are a lot of different people in the world, there are a lot of different ways to live out our faith too. In our gospel lesson we meet Jesus, Judas, and Mary a short time after Jesus has raised Mary’s brother Lazarus from the dead. The smell of death still hangs in the air, and Mary isn’t sure how long she will have anyone around. Life is feeling pretty unpredictable, and so in an act that serves both as worship and foreshadowing, Mary takes a bottle of

very expensive oil and pours it over his feet; a recklessly, wasteful act of devotion motivated by love and appreciation. When Judas sees this he hits the roof. What a waste! He suggests that perhaps a better tribute to Jesus would have been to sell that bottle of expensive oil and give the money to the poor, like Jesus had been teaching all along. Wouldn't that make sense? Jesus, no doubt sensing Mary's discomfort, explains that there is absolutely nothing wrong with Mary's action because it is rooted in love.

We judge each other a lot don't we? Over how we act, what we feel, about what motivates us.

Judas is no different. He is heaping a lot of judgment on Mary in this story, but I wonder why? We are given no indication that it is rooted in jealousy or resentment of Mary. He just really seems to have a chip on his shoulder. And then there is the interjections by the Gospel writer that Judas was a thief and just wanted to get his hands on the money himself ... that seem a bit judge-y too, doesn't it? But remember, writing this gospel years and years after the crucifixion the writer knows the role Judas played in the betrayal of Jesus. So he likely just added in the bit about Judas being a thief and a swindler to

further emphasize that he wasn't a nice person. And to remind us that yes, he is talking about THAT Judas.

But don't think Judas was passing judgment on Mary because he had ulterior motives or because he was a scoundrel; Judas was doing what we all often do, he was making a judgment on Mary because she isn't doing things the way he thinks they should be done and so, they must be wrong.

There is a lot of judgment in this story; the gospel writer judges Judas and Judas judges Mary. It is so easy it is for us to judge and criticize those whose actions aren't the same as our own, isn't it? Pretty easy for us for us to define others by the mistakes they have made, too. How many times have we looked at the actions or comments made by another person and simply dismissed them as wrong or meaningless because of who that person is and what that person has done in the past? How many times do we criticize the values and actions of others just because we would have done it differently? We all do it, at one point or another, and it really isn't fair, especially when the things we are judging is someone's response to God, someone's attempt to help, bring light, share gifts. It isn't fair when it is someone's response to love.

Consider for a moment what you would have done if you were Mary in this story. Would you, in a moment of recklessly wasteful love and appreciation have poured a life savings worth of oil on Jesus' feet? Or would you, like Judas suggests, have taken your life savings and given it all to the poor, made a donation to a charity in Jesus' name? Or would you have stashed the oil away safe and sound, a nest egg in case you needed it later, and simply told Jesus how much you loved him and appreciated him? Any of these seem like an appropriate response.

Bear in mind, Jesus had raised Mary's brother from the dead; some outward extravagant form of response seems right. I mean how do you ever repay that one? But realistically, knowing I have bills to pay and knowing life is uncertain, I probably would have been more comfortable stashing away my life savings and sending Jesus a thank you card instead, a letter expressing how much I love him, a text message filled with heart emojis. But the question is, when the response is rooted in love, is there ever really a wrong response here? The key seems to be in finding a response that makes sense to you, that is motivated out of love and gratitude. The problem is, it is

too easy for us to jump to the conclusion that someone or something is wrong, just because it is different from the way we would do it.

When we look at this gospel passage we see Judas reacting to Mary and insisting that her way of responding to Jesus must be wrong, because it isn't what he would do. And John, having a chip on his shoulder about Judas anyway, criticizes his suggestion about giving the money to the poor, insisting, unfairly that his motivations were selfish and crooked. But neither Mary nor Judas is wrong in this instance, their responses are just different.

If you are going to take one lesson with you from this passage, let it be this – we are all called to action, to respond to Christ's love in our lives, but it is up to us to find ways to act that make sense to us. And do it. In our reading from Ephesians this is described as “living as Children of the Light”. And we will all have slightly different ways of doing this, some will do it best through our music and our worship, some through their creativity in lockdown, their ability to manage money, their tech skills, their prayers or their outreach. The important part is to do it, while appreciating and respecting that we all bring our own unique gifts to the table.

It is so difficult to know God's will, isn't it? Hard to know, without the gift of hindsight, how our actions will play out. It is so hard to know what the proper responses are, how to best use the gifts we have been given, how to best say thank you. Perhaps we think on these things too much, what is the right way and what is the wrong way. Perhaps we judge each other too much, thinking this is wasteful, that is foolish, that we aren't loving the right way. Maybe we just simply have to pay less attention to what someone else is doing and more attention to what God is doing in our lives. And when we do that maybe then we will be free to respond ourselves with reckless abandon, responding in ways that make sense to us, that help us live out our calling to be light in the world.

The point is, as our reading from Ephesians tells us, with Christ in our life, we can be light. As long as our responses come from a place of love and gratitude they can be worship, and we can be light.

As our Lenten journey brings us closer and closer to Jerusalem and the cross, let us look for all the light we can find. Let us pray for understanding and openness with one another, let us judge a little less and celebrate a little more. As we go through our week, let us ask ourselves "What does the world see of Christ when it looks at

me?” and also, “Where can I see Christ in you?” Because Christ is here, that light is shining in the darkness, perhaps in new and unexpected ways, if only we give it a chance.

Amen.