**St. Ambrose**

**Fifth Sunday in Lent**

**April 7, 2019**

**John 12:1-8**

In the 1970s, probably because of my African heritage, I was recruited by the rector of a church I attended to make a pitch for raising money for an effort that was taking place in Mozambique in Southern Africa to clear approximately 171,000 landmines that contaminated the country.

This was the legacy of a nearly 30-year conflict in the country’s struggle for independence.

All I had to do one Sunday morning was quote some facts and figures during announcements

and ask people to write checks to support this effort.

People were extraordinarily generous, and without a doubt, their contributions, along with those of thousands of others resulted in what is believed to have been the destruction of last mine in September, 2015. This financial effort was enormous worthwhile.

Some months later I made another pitch at a Sunday service during announcements. This time it was to request volunteers to occasionally take folks who were unable to drive to and from church on Sunday mornings. I got no response. I repeated my request in different ways

over the next few weeks, but made little headway.

These experiences really made me think … and ultimately deeply convicted me. I became aware of many people’s realities in today’s busy world, often with both parents working,

children having to be shuffled from one after-school activity to another, and the seemingly endless “to do” lists that many of us struggle to get through.

And this reality isn’t just one that younger folks deal with; many baby boomers are dealing with the care of their parents, and many retired people are more involved in activities, and have more going on than when they were still working.

Many folks, compassionate as they are just don’t have the bandwidth to do one more thing.

It’s so much easier to write a check than commit to taking time away from our own families and from those things we need to attend to, not to mention the importance of taking care of ourselves.

I fell into the hands-off category – partly because of time constraints, but, when I was honest with myself, because I felt acute discomfort at the thought of engaging with people whose lives were seemingly so different from mine.

At the time, I was attending a church that served lunch to homeless folks once a month. My new awareness of how much easier it is to serve indirectly or at a distance rather than engage directly, made me acutely aware of how, at that time, our church members, servers at this monthly lunch, ladled large spoonfuls of food onto homeless folks’ plates from behind a kind of hatch window in the kitchen. We behaved like bystanders, on-lookers – for the most part removed and disengaged from those we were serving.

For all the fact that people were receiving nourishment, I am not sure the degree to which we understood just how impoverishing our stance of distance was – for those we served, but perhaps even more for us – who had so many barriers to tear down in order to be touched by folks who knew so much about our world, so much we needed to know if ever we were going to begin to discover our common humanity, and to do the work God had given us to do.

We had so much to learn about ourselves – our own discomfort and even our fear,when asked to give generously of ourselves – not just our financial resources, but our physical beings, our bodies, our human presence - our hands and feet - in our service to God.

We had so much to learn about how to put God’s love into action.

Mary anointing Jesus’ feet with perfume in this Gospel from John today epitomizes this kind of generosity. Her entire being in involved in this act … her hands to anoint Jesus’ feet, her long hair to wipe them.

In doing so, she demonstrates an extravagance that one person, at least, who witnessed this unbridled act of love in action, found objectionable and wasteful. Judas, whose name will forever be associated with the betrayal of Jesus, notes that the cost of one pound of nard is full year’s wages. And that it would make much more sense to give this money to the poor.

It’s so easy to judge Judas, isn’t it? In many ways, he’s the perfect scapegoat for all sorts of moral and ethical things with which we also struggle. Faithful church-goers and decision makers grapple with these kinds of money issues all the time.

Are we going to spend money on renovating a beautiful organ so that we can continue to make “a joyful noise unto the Lord,” or give more money to an earthquake fund for Episcopal Relief and Development? Or to make it even more local, does it make sense to spend $300 plus on a beautiful white chasuble for Easter to symbolize the celebration of the resurrection, or would our hard-earned money be more usefully served elsewhere?

None of us will ever know what was going on in Judas’ heart – none of us will ever really understand why only he carries the stigma as Jesus’ betrayer, when Peter, too, Jesus’ Rock, betrayed his Lord three times, and when we, too, betray Jesus in countless ways – choosing paths of safety and self-interest – the easy way rather than the right way, because putting love into action feels too risky.

What prompted Judas to object to Mary’s actions? Was it really because he was a thief, as the text states, or did the free expression of such extravagant love in such a demonstratively physical way embarrass him? Or, was he unable to come to terms with his own lack of love in the face of such overwhelming love?

We will never know his true motives. All we can ever really know is our own. What would our reaction have been to Mary had we been there? Would we have been mortified by such a spectacle of socially unacceptable emotionality, or perhaps convicted by how such powerful love might change us?

Whatever the reason for Judas’ reaction, Jesus will have none of it. “Leave her alone,” he says. What she is doing to me – what she is doing for me – speaks louder than words. In ways you can’t possibly fully know or understand, putting love into action in this way is what matters right now.

Why does our fleeting act of compassion matter?

Why does it matter that we show up for one another?

Why is it important that we really see one another?

Why does touch matter?

Because love put into action heals, revives, invigorates, and enlivens. It’s what gives us hope. It’s what gives life purpose. It’s what makes us human, as Jesus continually shows us. It’s how we see God.

Gospel stories recount endless incidents in which Jesus demonstrates love in action. He **tells** us to love, certainly, but more often, he **shows** us what love looks like – whether it’s giving people their sight, healing their infirmities, touching lepers, the untouchables of his time, or feeding thousands.

In just a few short weeks, we will witness, and be invited to participate in one of the most powerful acts of his ministry, an action involving his entire being by getting onto his knees and washing his disciples’ feet - another act of extravagant, wordless love.

Was that really necessary? Did Jesus really imagine he was cleaning the feet of men who spent their lives on dusty roads wearing sandals? Clearly not. Just as clearly, though, it was obviously terribly important to him to show his disciples what love and service really look like.

Jesus’ bending posture – the posture of a servant - remains for us, an icon of the ultimate posture of love and service – a posture that involves giving generously of ourselves – without regard of how it might look, of how people might interpret it, or of how silly or uncomfortable it may make is feel. It’s what we are called to do.

As Holy Week approaches, we are drawn into the ultimate and greatest drama of all, one that involves every aspect of Jesus’ humanity – God made flesh – his mind, his body, his soul – giving it all away freely in his death, so that through love – that same love that had proven to be too threatening both to the most powerful empire on the earth, and to a powerful religious institution - that through **this love,** good would redeem evil – light prevail over darkness, and life triumph overcome death.

Such is the power of love in action.

Finally, I want to quote **Brené Brown**, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, who has spent more than a decade studying vulnerability, courage, authenticity and shame. Turns out, Brené is a Christian woman, who happens to be an Episcopalian.

In a video available on YouTube entitled, Love Made Flesh,” an interviewer asks her about Jesus. “Jesus,” she says, “makes complete sense to her.”

Asked why, this is what she says.

“Because I believe God is love. It’s that simple and that complicated.

If you tried to express love to human beings and came down and just said,I am love, love each other, because we are so afraid of hard things, we would automatically go to unicorns and rainbows. So you would have to send someone to show what love in the flesh look like. You would have to send ‘what does love look like?’ Otherwise we would romanticize it – we would make it easy because that’s who we are as people.

So Jesus comes and says, OK – I am love. I sit with the people you don’t talk to. I do all the hard things. I make all the hard choices. I love the people that are unlovable. I feed the people who are not supposed to be taken care of. I don’t tolerate shame; I don’t tolerate attacks. Like I am love, and it’s hard and messy and dirty.

And if you really love, I mean, fierce, big love, you will become dangerous to people.

And so, there is no way that most of us could have understood what love was without seeing what love looked like.

So to me it makes perfect sense.

God is love and Jesus is what love looks like made flesh. And it’s hard and not a default. And it has nothing to do with rainbows and unicorns and fluffy stuffed animals.

It’s about choosing what’s right over what is easy.

I want love to be about that.”

*Amen.*