

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

God is love.

God is love.

We've heard that statement all our lives and we continue to hear it.

God is love.

Those are comforting words...uplifting words...reassuring words...soothing words.

Bishop Curry is fond of saying, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

But sometimes words alone are not enough. As much as the words, "I love you!" can stir our own hearts, words alone do not convey love.

How do we *know* that God is love? We need more than a simple statement.

Love isn't just a noun. Love isn't just a feeling. Love is action.

Throughout the Bible, God takes action to show love. He creates a beautiful garden for the man and woman He created. When they break their relationship with God, they must leave. God's chosen people find themselves in cruel captivity in Egypt, and God leads them to safety through the mighty waters of the Red Sea. God does something to show His love. When they are lost in the wilderness, God provides them with manna to eat, water from a rock and meat from the birds in the air. When they long for a king of their own, God provides them with David to lead them. When they are driven into exile by the Babylonians, God rescues them again and brings them home to the Promised Land. And when they lose their way in following God...when they lose sight of their relationship with God...when they forget the spirit of the law, but keep the law itself...God sends his Son, Jesus, to rescue them again.

God is love...and love is about action. Sometimes words are not enough.

While Jesus is here on earth among us, he shows us the nature of God...the abundance of God...the love of God...not just in the words he speaks but in the actions he takes. After his baptism, he spends time in the wilderness wrestling with the devil...and he wins. He shows us the strength of God. And when he turns water into wine at a wedding...he shows us the abundance of God. When he drives out demons from the afflicted...he shows us the compassion of God. And when he feeds five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread...he shows us the power and the extravagance of God. When he embraces the Samaritan woman at the well...he shows us the forgiveness of God. And when he offers himself up for

death on the cross...he shows us the love of God. There is nothing God wouldn't do for us. And God's actions demonstrate that because sometimes words are not enough.

More than anything else, Jesus shows us in both word and action that God's love is extravagant. It is more than we can imagine. It is 'over the top.' It is outrageous. And above all, it is not at all practical. Apparently, God does not put practicality above all else. Over and over again, God shows us that He puts loving action above all else because sometimes words are not enough.

Six days before Passover, in the little village of Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus is surrounded by the love of the family of his heart...Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. Theirs is the only home and family he knows in during his ministry. He is more 'at home' with them than any place else. Jesus has just brought Lazarus back to life and this little family have no words to express their gratitude to Jesus and their love for Jesus. Practical Martha is in the kitchen doing what she does best to express her love...making delicious food for all to eat and creating tempting aromas from the kitchen as she cooks. Impractical Mary is once again sitting at Jesus' feet, but this time she is not hanging on his every word. This time she is trying to express the gratitude in her heart and the love she feels for Jesus by doing something outrageous and extravagant. The fragrance from the expensive oil she uses to anoint Jesus' feet, fills the house and mingles with the delicious aromas from the kitchen. And her very own hair becomes the cloth she uses to wipe Jesus' feet. Sometimes words are not enough.

As Mary anoints Jesus' feet, we have to wonder: does she know what lies just ahead in a few short days? Does she know that in a few days Jesus will enter triumphantly into Jerusalem as the King of the Jews to cheering and adoring crowds? Is she anointing him for that? Does she know that by week's end, Jesus will be imprisoned, tried and convicted by another crowd and then nailed to a cross to die? Is she anointing him for burial? Or is she just trying to convey the overwhelming gratitude in her heart for Lazarus' presence at their dinner table? Surely Jesus knows what is about to come. Surely Jesus is feeling the soothing of the fragrant oil and the tender touch of Mary's hands. Pleasing fragrances lower our anxiety and create in us a sense of well-being. Jesus inhabits a very human body with senses that respond to touch and smell. Perhaps Mary is not aware that she is preparing Jesus for what lies ahead in just a few days. But Jesus is. Perhaps Mary's expensive and extravagant expression of love for Jesus is merely a shadowy echo of the expensive and extravagant expression of love that God is making through Jesus for the sake of all of us.

And in the midst of this beautiful and loving scene, is Judas...keeper of the purse...offers his rousing criticism of Mary's extravagance. "Just think how many poor people we could feed with the money you spent on that expensive and impractical oil." And haven't we all been in this

situation? Perhaps we are quietly objecting to what seems to us to be a waste of money and resources in our own world and circumstances. Or perhaps we are the ones being impractical with those resources. There is always the tension in any church about how much money is spent for beautiful acts of worship and how much money should be spent on outreach. It's a legitimate concern and one that requires a prayerful approach as we make our way in making decisions. Both outcomes are actions that convey our love for God and for our neighbor. And both are important. Both are commands that Jesus has given to us.

But in this situation, Jesus is very clear in his rebuke of Judas. "Leave her alone." Just as Jesus defended Mary against Martha's complaints that Mary was not helping Martha with the chores, Jesus is now defending her decision to use her resources for an extravagant expression of love and gratitude for Jesus. Sometimes it's just as important to feed the soul as it is to feed the body. And sometimes words are not enough.

It might be helpful to note here a questionable translation of Jesus' statement, "The poor you always have with you." That statement has for centuries been used to justify decisions to neglect the poor. That's not at all what Jesus was saying. If we look at the original Greek, we see that the verb used for 'have' may have been mistranslated in terms of tense. There is another translation of this phrase that may be more faithful to the original Greek which is: "Have the poor with you always." It's a command...not an observation. In other words, Jesus' mission was quite obviously centered around care for the poor and he is telling Judas and all those others who are listening that they should "always have the poor with you" at the center of your ministry...just as it was at the center of Jesus' ministry.

Caring for the poor is an act of love. Feeding them. Keeping them close. Offering words of encouragement and support are important and loving, but sometimes words are not enough. Jesus' willingness to die for all of us on the cruel cross was an extravagant and expensive expression of God's love. It is the most extravagant and expensive gift possible and the most profoundly meaningful to all the world. We know that God is love. We believe that God is love.

But sometimes knowing and believing are not enough. God knows that we need to be shown how much God loves us. Jesus volunteered to do just that because Jesus knows, too, that sometimes words are not enough. Sometimes love needs to be experienced in the most expensive and extravagant of gifts. And Jesus provided just that to all of us.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.

