***“Con-Formed”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, 4-7-19

**Philippians 3:8–9, 20–21**

8 For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. . . .

20But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

**John 12:1–8**

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” . . . .

7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, are siblings, and long-time friends of Jesus, who appear in several stories. Now, Mary is the one who “chose the better part” (Luke 10:42), who sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his teaching, while her sister Martha was prepping in the kitchen, complaining that Mary was not helping her. Later, Martha also has a great spiritual moment, being the first person to believe in Jesus’ resurrecting power. In the previous chapter of John, Jesus asks her if she believes that he will raise up anyone who believes in him. She answers “I believe” (John 11:25–27). So both sisters have memorable experiences with Jesus, where their faith shines through.

But in today’s text, it is Mary’s moment again. She takes “a pound of costly perfume,” anoints “Jesus’ feet, and wipe[s] them with her hair” (12:3). She is sad because she has heard Jesus utter those warnings that he will be killed, but, unlike Peter, she *believes* him, so she is anointing him in anticipation of his death. It is an act of respect.

Jesus shows respect to her, too. When Judas criticizes her and says the money could have been spent on the poor, Jesus is quick to defend her. Notice that he starts by saying “Leave her alone” (12:7). Really, Judas is bullying her, criticizing her unnecessarily, and Jesus puts a stop to *that*! He explains Mary’s action, which is legitimate and honorable, unlike Judas’ act. In fairness, Judas is not the only apostle who makes insensitive or thoughtless comments, but he’s the one who does it this time.

Then Jesus makes a thoroughly realistic comment: “you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (12:8). In other words: you are free to serve the poor at any time, but you will not get a second chance to show honor to the Son of Man.

Do we want to help the poor? Of course. Should that take over everything and even make us blind to relationships? No. Judas’ advocating for the poor looks shallow and insincere, while Mary’s honest friendship is honored by Jesus, and by us. This story in John is followed by the Last Supper, the arrest, execution, Resurrection, and the several appearances of the risen Jesus, first to the women, then to other disciples.

After the Resurrection, he seems to have a spiritual body, one that can pass through locked doors (John 20:19), that can appear and disappear, and about which he says to Mary “do not hold me” (John 20:17 RSV). That brings us to the Philippians passage, which says some mysterious things about our future bodies and Jesus’ body. Paul in this letter says we will receive a transformed body. Actually, he says our new body will be *con-formed* with Jesus’ own glorious body (Phil 3:21). It’s a new body that will resemble the body of the risen Jesus, which recalls the passage in First Corinthians on the “heavenly body” or “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:40, 44).

This is not a metaphor. He wants us to realize that our reception of a new body will really happen. It’s not a *vague* hope, but a *certain* one, although we know next to nothing about that new body. Presumably a resurrection body would normally be invisible to us. We don’t see spiritual things, although Jesus was able to make his risen form visible when he wanted to. The body we will receive is an actual body; it will have a certain *form*, apparently not too different in appearance from our human form. It is something we cannot really understand or analyze here, since the new body will have a *non-material* form. Down here, our eyes don’t see non-material things.

Our birthplace and our initial schooling in life and love are here, in *this* body, but we will need a spiritual body that will be at home over there. In Philippians, he tells us “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). Besides referring to our future home, this tells us that our highest loyalties must transcend our earthly ones. Of course, our highest loyalty is to God, to God’s will, and to the whole process of growing toward God.

Now, we can’t live with our head in the clouds down here. We have to take care of earthly needs, worldly survival. But our hearts can be set on the spiritual prize: our eternal community. Meanwhile, some very practical values, like respect, honesty, and friendship, serve us well, and that seems to be the lesson from the Gospel today. Some of our spiritual ideals and values come to us naturally, and others require some reflection and effort. I think Mary’s respect and friendship came quite naturally and easily. But the idea of “citizenship in heaven” requires some reflection. That’s the way it’s supposed to be. Loving God with all our hearts may come naturally, but loving God with all our minds takes some mental effort.

So, take *in* his love; also take some time to think about the teachings you hear, and then go forth and live confidently. We need both the happy *reception* of God’s blessings, and the necessary *study* of God’s wisdom. We need both a *peaceful* acceptance of our goals and duties, and a loyalty that is *active* to fulfill them. We need both relaxed *assurance* in the promises, and *energy* to serve others. Can you hear Jesus’ voice simultaneously giving you assurance, and encouraging you to go forth and do good? Can you hear him bolstering your self-respect and empowering you to go forth and live? “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt 11:15; 13:9 ESV).