

HOLY MONDAY - 1988
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 28, 1988
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

... how much more should the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Hebrews 9:14

What are we doing here this Holy Monday?? Maybe we've gone too far with three extra services in Holy Week ... maybe it's looking like "holy fanatics" at Hope? Are we going too far with our Holy Week holiness? Is that what this whole week is about ... A QUEST FOR HOLINESS??

Well, there may be some who would like to make this week a special quest for holiness. Certainly the text before us reflects that quest as a reality for the Hebrews. For the people of Israel - religion had become a quest for holiness. Just look at all the cultic symbols that are reflected in this text: holy priests ... holy tents or tabernacles ... the Holy of Holies ... holy, sacrificial goats and calves ... holy blood from these animals ... the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood ... holy ashes of the calves. Religion for Israel had become a cultic quest for holiness, reflected in all kinds of cultic holy rites.

Is that what Holy Week is for us ... another cultic quest to show God how holy we are. Please don't misinterpret me ... there is nothing innately bad with religious quests ... sometimes religious pilgrimages can be very illuminating ... none of us are harmed by additional circles of prayer ... there is often a great need for improved discipline in our spiritual lives ... certainly we can all benefit from quests for peace, for World Hunger, for arms reductions, for Christian unity, etc. But hopefully no quest is ever undertaken so that we might show God how holy we have become!!

And that gets to the point of this text from Hebrews. The writer here is not urging us TO SHOW GOD OUR HOLINESS, BUT RATHER TO BE SHOWN GOD'S HOLINESS!! In short, the message of Hebrews is that the quest has been fulfilled for us! Religion ... esp. Christianity ... is not a quest FOR holiness, but a quest OF holiness. We are not here to prove anything to God or one another ... we are here to reflect what God has already done for us: TO SHOW HOW THE BLOOD OF JESUS HAS MADE A HOLY DIFFERENCE IN OUR LIVES!!

Like many other texts, the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus has already run the perfect race for us. He has made the perfect sacrifice. There's no way that we can improve upon what he has already done!! The question is: WHAT WILL

WE DO WITH THE HOLINESS THAT HE HAS GIVEN US??

That's the real question ... or quest of Holy Week: not to seek to be holy, but to seek to make a holy difference! When the Hebrew writer refers to "dead works" -- he is referring to anything which does not reflect holiness.

Because we have been made "holy," we go beyond "dead works" -- we go beyond cultic, holy acts which merely parade piety ... we go beyond immoral acts which negate holiness ... we transcend a "worldly" lust and greed and guilt and all the characteristics of being "unholy."

Instead, like Christ himself, we become mediators of his holiness -- servants of his promises and power!! Stated differently, we transform the liturgy of the sanctuary into a litany of daily living!! The "living God" lives in us and through us ... we quest to reflect his image, his power, his holiness each and every moment.

That's the true quest of this week ... this Holy Week: TO SHOW THAT CHRIST'S BLOOD HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LESS THAN "HOLY" PLACES OF OUR LIVES. What difference will his blood make today at work ... at school ... at home ... with your children, your spouse, your associates, your friends? Will your life be a reflection of the living God ... or will it merely reflect the "dead works" of being a "holy Joe/Jane?"

MAY YOUR QUEST AND MINE NOT BE "FOR HOLINESS," BUT "OF HOLINESS" ... TO BE A REFLECTION OF THE LIVING GOD WHO GAVE HIS LIFE FOR US!

AMEN.

HOLY MONDAY - 1990
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 9, 1990
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

EXTRAVAGANT LOVE NOW, NOT LATER!

"Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair;... and Judas said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor.'" John 12:3-5

In my sermon yesterday, I indicated that Christian worship is always a RESTORATION PROJECT. We come here week after week, and day after day in Holy Week, because we are needed to have God's love RESTORED ... and equally, we are needing to RESTORE our love for him and one another.

Once we have been assured that God does love us ... then the focus comes back to us. After we have learned what he has done for us, the question always remains: WHAT SHALL WE DO FOR HIM?? The story of Mary and Martha, Jesus and Judas in John 12 focuses upon the second phase of RESTORATION: WHAT SHALL WE DO FOR HIM?

In the previous 11th chapter ... the entire focus is upon what Jesus has done for us. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. After this act ... combined with all the other assurances in John's gospel of the love of God ... there can no longer be any question about God's intention for humanity. Jesus has not come into the world that anyone would be condemned or denied God's grace; quite to the contrary, he has come that EVERYONE might be saved. "God so loved the world that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life."

Time and time again in this gospel - God makes his covenant absolutely clear: "I will love you and I will be your faithful God 'til the end of the age." So there is only one question remaining: HOW WILL WE RESPOND? WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THE LOVE OF GOD? And as God so often does, esp. in the gospel of Luke ... he uses what the world perceives as a weak vessel to show the true strength of his love. In this instance, Mary Magdalene becomes the source of restoration ... she becomes the light that shows us the way, the truth, and the life of real fidelity.

She takes a whole pound of expensive ointment (perfume) and pours it upon the feet of Jesus. (Can't you just feel the soothing power of that ointment for feet that have traveled the rocky, dusty roads of Israel?) Can there be a more graphic illustration of the love of God?? Mary took the most precious thing that she possessed, and she spent it all on Jesus. The love of discipleship, like the love of God, is always EXTRAVAGANT! Love, if it is the love of God, does not first calculate the cost! God did not withhold one single breath of Jesus' life; Jesus emptied himself totally so that we might know that God withholds nothing to assure us of his love. God is an extravagant lover!!

O'Henry wrote a moving story called, THE GIFT OF THE MAGI. There was a young couple, Della and Jim, who were very poor, but very much in love. Each had one unique possession. Della's hair was her glory. When she let it down it almost served her as a robe. Jim had a gold pocket watch which had come to him from his father; it was the source of his pride and joy.

It was the day before Christmas, and Della had exactly \$1.87 to buy Jim a present. She knew what she had to do; she went out and sold her hair for twenty dollars. And with the proceeds she bought a platinum fob for Jim's precious pocket watch. Jim came home that night. When he saw Della's shorn head he stopped in stupefied wonder. She looked lovelier than ever! But now slowly he handed her his gift; his gift was a set of expensive tortoise-shell combs with jeweled edges to comb her lovely long hair. And he had sold his watch to buy them for her. Each had given the other all he or she had to give. The love of God is always a totally extravagant gift!

There can only be one response to the extravagance of God's love; an equal extravagance of our love for him and for one another. Anything less is restricted love, reserved love, cheap love!!

But Mary's attention to Jesus shows another response of loving discipleship. She was chastised by Judas for not selling the ointment and giving the proceeds to the poor. Jesus responds: "You will always have the poor with you; but you will not always have me."

Jesus is not by any means deregating the poor. But he is saying that giving to the poor is the never-ending mission of the faithful. However, there are some things which will never get done unless we grasp the moment when it comes.

How many times have we been moved to utter a word of thanks, a word of praise, a word of love ... but then we put it off. And in putting it off, we only found that the moment never returned ... we never got another chance to say it again.

There is a time to be loved by God. And that time is always right now! It can never be put off. It will not wait 'til another day. Likewise, there is a time to love others as God has loved us. And that time is right now! It too can never be put off - it will not wait for another day!

That's the purpose of these quiet moments this Monday in Holy Week. To take time to receive the extravagant love of God. But to also take time to pray ... to think ... to meditate upon someone who might need that extravagant love from you or me today. Think about that. Pray about that. But above all - if you think you know of anyone who desperately needs to be loved ... ACT UPON IT! Don't put it off! For "behold, now is the acceptable time; now ... today is the day of restoration!" AMEN.

MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 13, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"FROM PUPPY LOVE TO PARADISE"

Over the weekend, I was talking with a young couple soon to be married. It was a wonderful 2+ hours. But one thing struck me about this virgin couple: THEY HAVE NOT YET REALLY KNOWN ANY PASSAGES OF PAINFUL SEPARATION! They have not yet had any of those times where the things that they make into gods are finally seen for what they are -- passing fancies of the moment. It's so hard for young people to realize that life confronts us with many painful passages of separation - esp. when you live in a protective, upper class environment.

I just look back at my first romance -- and there I was, confronted with my first painful separation. Do you remember your first puppy love? She was 2 years older than me; I was in 7th grade; she was in 9th. I'll never forget the kiss up in the bellfry of St. John's Lutheran Church -- I thought I had been transported to paradise ... lights flashed, the bells were ringing, the blood was boiling, and thank God, we heard the pastor coming up the stairs. I said from that day forward -- there couldn't possibly be a more perfect expression of love than that time with Kay.

Well, I'm not totally sure of all the details -- but I think that romance lasted a full, six months. But, boy do I remember the pain of separation. No more holding hands ... nor more hugs ... no more kissing! I remember saying to my parents - "I'll never love anyone like I loved Kay."

Well, you know the story better than me -- that was my first passage of puppy love. And I don't know about you -- but I've always felt that the first passage of puppy love is the most painful. We just never think that we'll ever have such intimacy again. But with time -- I certainly came to the realization that such puppy love was hardly paradise. It was an essential experience of growth and maturing -- but it was hardly the ultimate meaning of life.

And like for most of us -- then there was the educational passage: high school, college, grad school, seminary ... each of them having special challenges and equal rewards. But as crucial as education is -- it too has to be seen as a passage of separation. There are few of us who can find ultimate meaning in being a "perennial, professional student ... other than maybe Larry Michaels.

Teaching and preaching became the next passage: for more than 20 years now, this job has been my primary passage of existence. There are certainly times (probably too many) that I live and act as if this job is the ultimate meaning of life. After all - what could be greater than being pastor of Hope Church?!? But I'm not alone -- all of us in this room have too often allowed our jobs to totally define our existence and self-worth! But one day we all realize - THIS TOO SHALL PASS!

And then there will be new passages for me to face -- possibly another congregation, maybe work as a professional grief counselor, and hopefully some years of retirement in order to perfect my terrible slice on the golf course. But this passage will not last either -- the time will come for the ultimate separation ... the separation from life itself.

There comes a time when each of us is forced to look back and ask: WHAT IS LASTING? WHAT IS REALLY REAL? WHAT DOES NOT OR WILL NOT CHANGE? WHAT REALLY MAKES A DIFFERENCE FOR ALL TIME AND ETERNITY? That time came for Mary Magdalene at a dinner party at the home of Lazarus. It was on that night at that particular event that Mary Magdalene seemingly came to the realization THAT ONLY ONE THING COULD BE TRUSTED FOR ALL ETERNITY: THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST! And that awareness caused Mary to do something very extravagant ... very risky ... very unwise according to Jewish religious standards: SHE WASHED JESUS FEET WITH EXPENSIVE OINTMENT. Mind you - she didn't anoint his head ... she wasted precious ointment by washing his dirty, traveling feet.

There have been many since Mary who have been ridiculed for this same extravagant response to the love of Christ. I'm certain there were many in the medical community who thought that Albert Schweitzer was an absolute kook for the way he practiced medicine among the poor, diseased & depraved. There were certainly hundreds (thousands) of 16th Century Roman Catholics who felt that Martin Luther was far too extreme in his response to the grace and mercy of God. And which one of us who lived during the 60's did not hear constant criticism of Martin Luther King for his "dream" of tumbling down the walls of bigotry through the non-violent love of God?

The story of Mary Magdalene was never meant to be an ancient romance narrative during Holy Week centuries ago. Like Mary Magdalene - each of us in this room have made other things our gods during various passages of our lives. For some like Mary, the god may be sexual passion & perversion. For others, the god has been a lust for property, possessions and ever-expanding portfolios. For still others, the god has been self-impatuation, or youthfulness, or notoriety, or some other puppy love of this world.

Just like Mary Magdalene that night at the home of Lazarus, God again and again invites us to his dinner party. And God confronts us time after time at this dinner meeting with the same words: What is lasting? What will not change from this year to next? What will really make a difference in your life and mine forever and ever??

Hopefully, like Mary Magdalene - we will see there is only one reality that can be trusted ... there is only one person who has NEVER LET ANYONE DOWN ... there is only one Lord and Savior whose word has remained the same, regardless of our guilt or greed ... our good days or bad days. He always comes to the table with the same gracious offer: Take and eat, take and drink ... receive the assurance of mercy & forgiveness.

What a powerful moment it is when a person realizes that God offers more than puppy love at his dinner table or wherever he is present. There is no other dinner party in the world that offers a taste of paradise on earth. Is it any wonder that Mary Magdalene was so extravagant in her faithfulness to Jesus Christ?!? Can we afford to be any less extravagant in a world that passess off "puppy love and perverted passion" as the real thing??

AMEN.