

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (C)  
March 21, 2010  
Texts:       Philippians 3:4b-14  
              John 12:1-8

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It took me a week or two to get through “Winter Olympics withdrawal.” I really enjoyed watching the competition this year. And I think one of the things I enjoyed most was hearing the stories of some of the athletes, of their love for their sport, and their total devotion and dedication to it. There were the Chinese pairs skaters, Zhao and Shen, who had been skating together for 18 years, since childhood, and had retired after a long and successful career. But they decided to come out of retirement in order to try to win gold in the Olympics. And they did! But what dedication and drive and sacrifice it took! They put their lives on hold to prepare. Even though they were married, they lived in the athletes’ dormitories. So at the end of the evening he had to go to the men’s dormitory, and she had to go to the women’s. And they practiced hours and hours, day after day. And there was the American speed skater, Apolo Anton Ohno, who would push himself through four 2-hour workouts every day. That’s like working out as a full-time job! I find it truly amazing.

We may not have ever experienced that kind of intense athletic dedication. But I’d guess that most of us know what it’s like to pour heart and soul into something, to give it all we’ve got, to put our best effort into it—maybe as a parent, giving everything we’ve got to raise children who are healthy and strong. Or maybe in school, or in our career, we worked like we’ve never worked before—to finish a project, to complete a program.

Our gospel story for today invites us to think about our devotion to God, pouring heart and mind and soul into our love of God and our desire to be God’s person, to live our lives by God’s values, God’s priorities. Jesus had come to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary. Earlier, the gospel of John has told about how Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Now, as Jesus and the other guests are reclining around the table with Lazarus, with Martha serving the dinner, Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment—an extravagant act. And if that weren’t enough, then she wiped his feet with her hair. Mary was showing more than gratitude. She was indentifying herself, in effect, as Jesus’ slave. It was an act of complete devotion.

It isn’t hard to appreciate the depth of her feelings, and her complete lack of concern for what anyone else might think. Lazarus was her brother. He was also the head of the household, the one provided financial stability for the family. When he died, Mary and Martha lost pretty much everything. And when Jesus gave Lazarus back to them, he gave them back everything. For Mary, a gift like this to honor Jesus—anything less was unthinkable.

Mary challenges us. How freely do we express our love and devotion to God? After all, God has given us life, forgiven our sins and claimed us as God’s children, and promised that nothing—not even death—has the power to separate

us from God's love. Mary challenges us to consider whether our response to God is full of gratitude and joy and awe and wonder, whether it is unconstrained and full of heart, or whether it is socially acceptable and proper and dignified. Mary certainly let propriety and self-concern fly out the window when she anointed Jesus feet, when she let her hair down and wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. Who cares what the neighbors may think!

There's a wonderful story in the Old Testament, about King David. Once, when the ark of the covenant—that beautiful, gold-covered chest that was the symbol of God's presence with Israel—was brought into Jerusalem, David led the parade wearing a simple linen garment, dancing like crazy, jumping and leaping and—well, it wasn't very modest. His wife was horrified. But David's answer to her was: he was dancing for God, and if he looked foolish—well, he was God's fool.

I wonder how extravagantly we can express our love for God. When we sing to God, can we really belt it out, praising God with everything we've got, with every fiber of our being? When we pray, do we pour our whole heart into being in God's presence, full of awe and wonder and love? Do we allow ourselves to laugh and cry with God? And when we give to God, will we give generously, with deep gratitude for every gift God has already given us?

That is the key, you know. God has already given us every gift. God has given us life—this amazing, breathtaking gift to be alive, to be part of this amazing, beautiful world. God gives us air to breathe and food to eat and water to drink. God provides everything we need through the bounty of creation. God gives family and friends and neighbors—a whole human community—with whom to share all these amazing gifts.

Unfortunately, we—and the whole human family—haven't treated these gifts very well. We haven't treated this beautiful creation very well. And we haven't treated each other very well. In fact, often we don't even treat ourselves very well—not like the temple in which God desires to dwell. That's why God has come to us in Jesus, to restore us to right relationship with God, with our neighbors and ourselves and with all of creation. God forgives our sin and gives each of us a new identity as a child of God. In baptism, God washes us clean and says we are pure and holy in God's sight. And God calls us back to our true life, to live with God, to live in peace and harmony and justice and love.

This amazing, astounding gift upon gift is what leads Paul to say, in our reading from Philippians, "Whatever I had managed to build in my life that I was proud of, I consider it all as less than nothing because of the surpassing, overwhelming value of knowing Jesus Christ as my Lord." And for Paul, that's no small statement. He had built quite a life for himself. But he says to receive this gift of forgiveness from God, to have life with God and the promise of eternal life, life with God that goes on and on and never ends—it makes everything else seem like it's not such a big deal at all.

Paul says that, for now, this life with God means sharing in the passion of Christ—in his suffering—because that's what's needed, for us to be partners with

God in repairing and healing this whole sad, hurting world. As children of God, we get to share in God's great work of love—a work of passion!—to bring wholeness to the human family and all of God's creation. This is the sort of life we can give heart and mind and soul to, and feel it's the best deal we ever made. About this life Paul says something one of those highly dedicated athletes might say. He says about serving God, "I shut out of my mind everything that lies behind me, and I strain forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

And we do too. We press on to the goal. With all our heart, with all our passion—like those Olympic athletes who give their all, and like Mary of Bethany, like David the king, so long ago—we devote ourselves completely to God, following Jesus in his way of love, and letting our whole life serve God's good and graceful purposes. Thanks be to God. Amen