

## **“A Community of Discernment”**

Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might hear the teaching of Christ and open our minds to the Spirit's wisdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Throughout the season of Lent, we have been looking at the scriptures to see what they tell us about church, about what church is for and what it is we are to do when we gather here as a community. The overarching answer, of course, is follow Jesus. Church is here to help us follow Jesus. Over the past four weeks, we've talked about the importance of safeguarding one another's hearts. We talked about how the church is a place where we tell stories of memory and hope, looking to the past and the future to shape the present moment. We named that this is a place where we come to realign our thoughts with God's thoughts and get our feet back on the path of Christ. And last week, of course, we talked about how church is really a party and we need to make sure everyone knows they are welcome.

Today I want to talk about church as a community of discernment. Our scriptures today are brimming over with dramatic contrasts. They help us see that following Jesus often requires saying No to some things so that we can say Yes to other things. But they also help us name how hard it can be to know when to say No and when to say Yes. Yes, even Paul had trouble with it.

It's sometimes hard to hear any nuance in the writings of Paul; the strength of his convictions and passion often seems to drown out the complexity of what he's talking about. This passage, in particular, can just sound like what the internet these days calls "humble bragging." But it's humble bragging with a purpose. I would argue that the most important word in these verses is "loss." Sure, later Paul calls his impeccable credentials as a Pharisee "rubbish," but twice he says he "regards them as loss," and I think we need to pay attention to that. Paul is naming that he gave up something of value. It was pretty okay being Saul back then, when he had all that status and power. He left all that behind to become a newbie in a movement that had no reason whatsoever to trust him, let alone give him room to become one of their chief spokespersons.

Paul's main point is the worth of being claimed by Christ. He is trying to show us how valuable that is by listing all the things he gave up for it. Grace is free, but following Jesus is not without cost. There are things we will need to leave behind, things we will lose. There may be days when we miss those things we left behind, and so Paul wants to keep us focused on the eternal worthiness of Christ so we can see that our losses cannot measure up to what we've been given.

This may not feel like a particularly relatable situation for those of us who were brought up in church, who didn't have a dramatic conversion experience like Paul did. Most of us didn't have a moment when we left our whole previous life behind to start following Jesus. Rather, we are most likely to have been living lives of

compromise for years, following Jesus much of the time and rationalizing our choices that don't align with the gospel as needed. It can actually be a lot more complicated to follow Jesus when the things we need to give up are more subtle and entwined with our faith already.

That's why I'm grateful for the second story about choices we have in our readings today. Because the nuance is even deeper here. "A pound of costly perfume made of pure nard." Judas would have us view Mary as a frivolous, wasteful person because she anointed Jesus' feet with this ointment. But you know what I bet? I bet Mary cared about the poor too. In fact, if those parenthetical asides are any clue, it seems likely that Mary cared more about the poor than Judas did. And we certainly know that Jesus cared about the poor. He talked about them all the time. He fed them. He healed them. He blessed them. He reminded them that they were beloved children of God. He promised them the kingdom of heaven.

And yet, Jesus understands the importance of that expensive perfume. He defends Mary's use of it. Jesus understands grief, even when it is subconscious, anticipatory grief. He knows how important dramatic gestures can be for processing and sacralizing grief. Jesus would never tell us to say No to the poor so that we can say Yes to greedy excess. And yet, in this instance, he is saying Yes to costly ritual and No to... what exactly? The narrator does not think Jesus is saying No to the poor here. Perhaps he is saying No to extreme asceticism? Or more clearly, he is saying No to moral posturing, No to judging the actions of your supposed friends, No to

pretending someone's gesture is wrong when you're just mad you didn't think to do it yourself. Maybe he's just saying No, it's more complicated than that. Because it almost always is, isn't it?

Any money we spend on something is money we can't spend on something else. Any time we give to a project or to sleep or to chilling out is time we can't use to do something else. This is the way our mortal lives work. We are constantly having to say No to a thousand things so that we can say Yes to one thing. The question is how often we realize that we're doing that, and whether we're making those decisions with intention and thoughtfulness.

And this is why, as church, we need to provide a community of discernment for one another. There are a thousand things out there clamoring for our attention and our support and our money. We may not even realize which ones we've been saying Yes to in ways that have kept us from saying Yes to Jesus. It's here at church that we can talk through the decisions that make up our lives and hold them up together to the light of the gospel to see if they reflect or obscure the love of God.

It's hard because we have pounded home for years Jesus' teaching that we should "judge not, lest we be judged." But good, gospel judgement is actually a central requirement of faithfulness. Following Jesus sometimes means rejection, saying No to the things that harm God's beloved creation. We cannot say Yes to love without saying No to cruelty. We cannot say Yes to Christ's welcome without saying No to exclusion. We cannot say Yes to God's generosity without saying No to greed.

We cannot say Yes to God's justice without saying No to scapegoating. We cannot say Yes to God's beautifully diverse creation without saying No to prejudice. Just like Paul, we cannot say Yes to our unity in Christ without saying No to the divisions that rewarded us with status and power. Just like Mary, we cannot say Yes to the full depth of our feelings without saying No to hypocrisy.

Far too often, we approach drawing these lines with timidity and deference. We don't want to be seen as judgmental or rude. But the gospel demands that we be clear. Love requires that we choose sides. And so we gather here as church, to discern in community where the lines need to fall, which things deserve our Yes and which things require our No. We offer grace to one another, as we grow in our individual capacity to let go of the things standing in the way of our Yes to Christ Jesus. But we speak the truth in love, I hope, rather than posturing and pretending. We share our hopes for what God's world can be, and together, chart a course of intentions that gets us closer to that vision. When we gather as a community of discernment, church becomes a place that makes it easier for each of us to follow Jesus more faithfully, saying No when we need to so we can say Yes where God wants us to. May it be so. Amen.