FIRST THINGS AND OTHER STUFF
Scripture: Philippians 3:4-14 and John12:1-8

FOCUS: We are called to good works, but they are always to be in response to having encountered the awesome grace and presence of Christ.

Not too long ago there was a backlash against an appeal on the website of Creflo Dollar Ministries urged people to **"Sow your love gift of any amount"** to help the ministry buy a sixty five million dollar Gulfstream G650 airplane. In response to the negative publicity the online appeal was taken down, but the fund raising continued. What in the world was this minister of the gospel thinking? What must Jesus be thinking? With all the pain and suffering in the world, with all the need right there in Atlanta, the home of Dollar’s ministry, how could this man be so ridiculously extravagant? Surely he could find something better to do with the money. It is disgusting.

Go back with me a couple of millennia to the modest, but comfortable home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Their dear friend Jesus and his traveling companions were there for a meal. In those days, much as is still the case today, meals together on special occasions were times of companionship and celebration. It would soon be Passover and everyone was in a festuve mood. Lazarus, back from the dead, was at the table insuring everyone was properly entertained, Martha was serving. She had been fretting about this meal for days and was seeking to make everything just perfect. Meanwhile Mary had been anxiously awaiting Jesus arrival and had immediately begun to take up his attention as she listened to whatever he could teach her. Martha was stressing over the meal, the seating arrangement, the table décor, the quality of the food. She was more than a bit frustrated by Mary’s failure to assist in the kitchen.

As if that were not enough, once they all arrived at the table Mary did something so outrageous it was almost beyond belief. She took out a jar of extremely costly nard, an imported essence from rare flowers found only in high Himalayan Mountains of Nepal and China. Its value is estimated to have been a year’s wages. Then she really went off the deep end. Without saying a word, Mary knelt down anointed Jesus’ feet with the oil, wiped them with her hair and returned to her place at the table.

She was wrong on so many levels. First there was the public display of wealth. This was a middle class family, they didn’t make a show of what few things of value they had and it certainly was not their habit to be reckless with them. There was the matter of proper modest behavior. Women were not to touch men, not even their husbands, in public and certainly were to avoid intimate gestures toward other men. The use of her hair to massage the oil into Jesus’ feet was a major cultural offense.

It was Judas who .quickly questioned the extravagance. ***“Woman, are you ought of your mind! Do you have any idea how much good we could have done for the homeless, for those who are struggling to make ends meet, who have no idea where their next meal will come from? And there are folks in need of medical care who are not getting it because they don’t have the money for the fee. What a waste, what a mistake. We could have done so much good!”***

I have been guilty in the past of focusing on the parenthetical statement in this story, words added by John but never spoken by Jesus, about Judas being motivated by greed. I, like many scholars, have assumed he was thinking, had Mary given the nard to the ministry he could skim some off the top for himself. Such may well be the case, but I am certain he was not the only one taken aback by her display. I imagine the disciple and their other two hosts shaking their heads. Lazarus and Martha might well have been more than a little angry, wondering where their sister came up with the money to pay for the ointment. Or perhaps it was common property which now was worthless.

Who could blame those first century followers? Judas’ logic makes pretty good sense to me. It is reflected in my disgust with the very idea of a minister of the gospel seeking to shame others into giving money they don’t have to finance a high end private jet. Then comes one of the most confusing things Jesus ever said. He had just spent three years of ministry focused, not on the wealthy, not on the powerful, but on caring for the least, the last and the lost. Jesus was homeless himself during those three years, by choice. Jesus declared if we are to be true disciples we must put aside privilege and carry crosses.

He told the rich young ruler he needed to sell everything he had and to give the proceeds to the poor. Those gathered for the meal certainly would have known all of those things, no wonder they immediately rebuked Mary. But not Jesus. If we are not careful we give his words a flavor which is not there. I have been guilty. I have had difficulty with his response because I have unintentionally heard Jesus say, ***“Don’t worry about the poor, they will always be around.”*** We certainly still have a global crisis of poverty and I fear it will always be so. But that doesn’t relieve us from the responsibility of working against the forces of evil which perpetuate the blight.

As I rethought Jesus’ words I came to see them more as a sad lament than a flip statement of an obvious fact. I imagine his heart was heavy, both as he confronted what he knew lay before him during his coming week of passion, and because he would wish nothing more than poverty and suffering would become a thing of the past. But he knew better, he knew there would be need, and he also knew it would be a primary responsibility of his disciples for all time to be about a ministry of compassion. So why did he follow the lament about poverty with a declaration of his impermanence? We will come back to that in a few moments.

For now I want us to turn our attention to Paul’s somewhat edgy words in his letter to the church at Philippi. Paul is bold as he writes to the church from prison. His fate is uncertain, a fact of which he is fully aware. As he writes there is trouble in the church to which he sends greetings. The issue most on Paul’s mind is the influence of those claiming circumcision to be an absolute necessity for all believer, Jew or Gentile. In The Message Paul warns the church to ***“Beware of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they are interested in is appearances – knife happy circumcisers, I call them”***

Paul was never one to mince words. He recognized there were those who were still focused entirely on keeping laws, who practiced works righteousness. He understood them, he had been one of the most zealous of their kind, hence his passion concerning the heresy which had once been his. Paul now realized works righteousness is not righteousness at all and he wanted to help the church he loved come to the same realization.

Having called out those who would insist on circumcision he goes on to describe true righteousness. He declares real circumcision to be marked, not by procedures performed on earthly bodies, rather by a life which puts faith in the Spirit of Christ first in all things. Lest they forget, Paul reminds the good church folk of his credentials, credentials which were stellar, credentials which surpassed those of his readers. Paul starts right off with the matter about which there was controversy. ***“I was circumcised on the eight day just as the law required, I am an Israelite by blood, a Hebrew through and through, of the tribe of Benjamin with a pure pedigree. I know the law better than most of you for I am a Pharisee, a student of the law and I have kept it meticulously. No one can say I lack passion. Just ask those I persecuted prior to my conversion.”***

I imagine Paul thinking, ***“So what do you think of that?”***. Then he gets a bit crude and makes a dramatic point. He writes he now considerers those credentials he has gained, the impressive ones which the people hearing his words read would have envied, a loss, not a gain. He doesn’t stop there, he goes on to say he now counts them as rubbish. Actually the word he used is a bit cruder but we will leave it alone. So being a follower of the law is garbage? Being one who studies the law and seeks to follow it is wasting time? Being one of God’s chosen race by birth is a pedigree to be tossed aside? Being passionate is a bad trait to be overcome?

That is what Paul seems to say, but we must read on. Paul writes, ***“I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and 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.”*** Paul has put away his old, flawed idea of righteousness. He has recognized the source of eternal righteousness. He writes, ***“I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering and go all the way with him to death itself.”*** Having personally encountered the power of Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul has found a new direction, a new motivation, a new purpose, a new foundation.

There is a common theme in our two texts. It is a theme repeated throughout the scriptures. What we have encountered this morning are some strong messages about priorities. Those pragmatists among us understand the dilemma often created when it comes to setting priorities. We pragmatists, and I count myself among the afflicted, want straight forward clear answers. We want options a and b and the ability to choose one or the other. But life is not so simple. We encounter complexity at every turn and rarely are our choices like Let’s Make a Deal. God is no spiritual Monty Hall instructing us to take our chances and to choose door number 1, 2, or 3. There are times I wish it were so. But God expects us to think more deeply.

God offers many options, many opportunities, many choices. God doesn’t say you have to pick one. More often God says, you need to get them all in proper order. Do you see the difference? Have you ever known an obsessively organized person? Perhaps you are one. I have plenty of hang-ups but obsessive organization is not one of mine, Kathy will vouch for me there. And a quick look in my office will add credence. Ask Frank how many times he has inquired about the delivery of a certain bill only to be offered a vague and safe, ***“I don’t think I’ve seen it!”*** later to be sheepishly delivered said bill when I uncover it. I’m a fan of the plaque I saw on a colleague’s desk back in my banking days. It asked ***“If a cluttered desk is the sign of a cluttered mind, what is the empty desk a sign of?”***

One of the problems with my cluttered desk is on occasion I will discover something really important and time sensitive has been covered up by other stuff. Not bad stuff, just stuff which is not quite as critical. My mind is at times similarly disorganized. I think it is just such clutter which is addressed in our morning texts. Jesus was not saying to Martha and others at the dinner party, “poverty is not a problem.” Nor was he saying we should ignore the poor. He was saying we need to straighten up our messy priorities, insuring we have not focused on the good stuff while misplacing the fundamentals of the faith.

For Martha the good on which she was focused to the detriment of the best was hospitality, fellowship and a gathering of good friends. It was certainly to her credit she wanted to appropriately honor Jesus with a fine meal, but she was missing the opportunity to interact one on one with Jesus, to be encouraged and instructed by the Son of God, she was too distracted. Mary sat and listened, Mary understood what most, if not all, of those gathered had been told by Jesus but had either forgotten or ignored. Mary understood what lay before him in Jerusalem so she wanted to hear what he could teach her in these last days and she wanted to honor in advance the sacrifice he would make. We don’t know what Jesus told Mary as she sat at his feet that day. I would not be surprised if he reminded her after he was gone it would the responsibility of disciple such as her to carry out his mission, a mission which clearly was not dismissive of the needs of others.

Returning for a moment to Paul and his advice to the Galatian church, I’m reminded again of the odd notion generally a person’s greatest strength and greatest weakness are the same thing. Paul’s passion, his pride in his heritage, his dedication to the law were destructive and evil when driven by hatred and pride. Having encountered Christ one on one, he recognized the true worth of all that stuff, it was nothing more than trash when employed for evil. Yet we know from the collected works of Paul he never stopped being proud of his heritage. He never stopped seeking to live according to God’s law, and he certainly remained ever passionate.

So what was the difference? Paul had uncovered the most important thing in the pile. He had encountered Jesus and committed himself to living the Christ like life. He didn’t get rid of those traits which made him who he was, he did get them in proper order, and that made all the difference. He first offered them, all of them and all of him, to Christ and then put them to work for the building of the kingdom of God. His priority became placing everything at the disposal of God. He then went about doing good, because that is what God does through willing folk.

In our gospel story Jesus wasn’t encouraging wasteful spending, he wasn’t calling for folks to sacrifice so he could have a state of the art chariot. He was not calling for the poor to be ignored, rather he was recognizing the outpouring of love and generosity of the only one there who understood. Mary realized what was of first priority, a commitment to the Spirit of Christ. Having uncovered that truth she would go forward, serving, loving and reflecting the light of the one she honored.

We like Paul, like Mary, like all those at the meal long ago, are called to lay a foundation of faith in Christ. But a foundation is meant to support and enable a building. Having acquired the foundation it is then our task to build a godly life upon it. We are called to offer our all to Christ. Then, properly motivated by our encounter, we must go forth to serve, to love and to share God’s grace. For your sake, for the sake of a confused world and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who can put things back in order, let it be so. In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.