

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for March 13, 2016 ~ Lent 5C
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It is always surprising to me when someone asks me a question about free will. It is not a topic that occupies the thoughts or theologies of most people any more. Perhaps that is because people so freely exercise their wills in our culture that it never dawns on them that there could be any limitations. Or, perhaps, it is because the question of free will really is less significant than questions concerning grace. In this church, at least, you are far more likely to hear sermons from the point of view that it is God's grace and not the exercise of our wills that saves us. As our collect for the day say, only God "can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners."

To say that we are free to choose suggests that our own actions put us in a right relationship with God. Perhaps the freedom God gives us is not so much *freedom to choose* as *freedom to resist*. And the only force in the universe that is powerful enough to overcome our resistance is God's grace. When we experience that grace, we cease to resist. The more we grow in God's grace, the less we resist God. The less we resist God, the more clearly we see the "new thing" God is doing – in our life, in our corporate life, in the life of the world.

Jesus' life and ministry was in serious transition. He had left his ministry in Galilee and was moving toward the cross. On the Saturday before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he was invited to a dinner in his honor given in the Bethany home of his friends, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. During that dinner, Mary brought out a flask of very fine perfume. In an extravagant expression of her love and gratitude, she poured the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Mary's expression of affection went beyond words and it made clear to Jesus what was in her heart.

Mary had experienced grace! Jesus had raised her brother Lazarus from death. When Lazarus' life was restored, so was hers. She was profoundly grateful to Jesus and she loved him very much. She knew that every moment with him was precious and she did not hesitate to express her feelings. There was no resistance, no hesitation, no estrangement, no barrier. She was moved to express her feelings for him and uninhibited by the risk of violating customs or the fear of embarrassment. The opportunity presented itself and she demonstrated her gratitude. The tenderness of her action, like the fragrance of the perfume, filled the room.

Then, from this beautiful, touching scene, the gospel writer shifts our attention to the presence of another friend of Jesus whose heart was not so pure. Judas is shocked and outraged by Mary's shameless outpouring of love. He demands to know why she is wasting this expensive perfume instead of selling it and giving the money to the poor. We are reminded that Judas was the treasurer of the disciples and it would be Judas who would later betray Jesus with a gesture of affection, a kiss.

What a contrast! Two people, friends of Jesus, one whose act of love is pure and in response to grace, and another whose act of love is a lie, motivated by his resistance to the very same grace.

Judas' reaction to Mary's actions sounded practical and responsible. It sounded like good stewardship and compassion for the poor. But Jesus knew he was going to die. It wasn't any secret among his friends either. They all knew each moment with him was precious. Mary's anointing of his feet was like the preparation of his body for burial. He knew that there would be many opportunities to

minister to the poor for those who really cared about them. But there would not be many more opportunities to express love and gratitude for the grace Jesus had brought into their lives.

She seized the opportunity and loved Jesus in an extravagantly generous way in response to what his grace had done in her life and the lives of those around her. Judas had the same opportunity and knew the same grace, but he resisted. Mary's response hangs in the air like a fragrant perfume to this day. Judas' resistance is a stench in our nostrils – the stench of death.

God's promise of grace liberates us from the resistance that limits our lives. When St. Paul experienced grace in the encounter with the Risen Christ, his values were rearranged. The achievements of his past life were not worth comparing with the experience of new life in Christ. His resistance to God had taken the form of radical obedience to the Law of God. He sought to obtain a right relationship with God based on his own efforts and his own goodness. When that transformation occurred, he realized that the only truly right relationship with God is established by God out of God's grace. No person can put God in debt! Whenever we try, it is an act of resistance.

So, the goal of a Christian's life is to become so open and mature in faith as to cease resisting God altogether. That takes an enormous amount of grace. And, it is difficult to measure our progress. Following the law, making money, obtaining recognition, are ways that make monitoring progress much easier, or at least it appears that way. We really like to quantify things, don't we? But the problem with that approach in regard to grace is that it places conditions on loving God, loving our neighbors, and loving ourselves. Whereas, the grace of God is unconditional.

St. Paul removed the conditions and thus the resistance. He described it this way, "All I want is to know Christ..." Mary, in her own lavish way, also removed the conditions and the resistance when she anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair.

We are created in the image of God for a living relationship with God. That living relationship with God is the only thing that matters. The value and the quality of everything else and every other relationship depend on that one. The only way we can have that right relationship is through God's grace. It is absolutely free and cannot be bought, earned, or deserved. God both invites us into the relationship and provides us with the means of entering it. Only our own resistance keeps us from it. Nothing we can do for ourselves can save us. Only God's grace can do that.

So it is God's grace that spreads a banquet before us today and invites us to it. Neither our worthiness nor our unworthiness gains us a place at this feast. We are included not because of anything we have done or left undone, but because of God's generosity. When you kneel here, nothing you bring with you is worth a dime. When you rise, you will have received the gift of the only thing that matters, something of incomparable value, and the very life of God will be coursing through your veins. God, by God's grace alone, will do a new thing in your life today. You are free to resist. But, I wonder, why would you want to?

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.