



*How Do I Respond to a Generous God?*

*John 12:1-8*

*5th Sunday of Lent ~ Sunday, April 7th, 2019*

*Communion Sunday*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

*The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.*

*Text: The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (v. 3b)*

Have you ever been filled with so much gratitude that you just didn't know how to respond? Think about that for a moment. I hope that you have. I have. As a matter of fact, I have had several times in my life. One was in the summer of 1991. I was fulfilling a residency requirement for my Doctor of Ministry degree at McCormick seminary in the Hyde Park area of Chicago. I shared a large apartment with three other students. We each had our own bedroom and shared a common kitchen, dining room, and living room.

One bright sunny day we were eating lunch in the cafeteria after the morning classes. I thought that I would eat healthy so I filled my cafeteria tray with cooked carrots, green beans, tossed salad, and baked fish. All four of us were in good spirits as we joked and kidded each other freely. Suddenly I had this queer sensation. I felt warm. My ears felt full. I could hear my heart beating--no pounding. I felt lightheaded. I felt my wrist. My pulse was odd, irregular.

Thump...thump ... thump thump thump ... ..thump thump ... thump.

I was scared. I didn't know what was happening. I excused myself and walked back to the apartment. I laid down, but I couldn't relax. I took a warm shower thinking that that would help. It didn't. I had this feeling of doom. I was all alone. I remember thinking to myself that something was terribly wrong. I figured that I could stay in the apartment or walk to the nearby University of Chicago hospital. If something bad happened in the apartment, I don't know when anyone would find me. If I walked the six blocks to the hospital and collapsed, at least someone would find me on the sidewalk and do something. I skipped the afternoon session of class, wrote a note to my apartment mates that simply said, "I'm not feeling well. I went to the hospital," and started walking.

The University of Chicago hospital, at that time, was quite a trauma center. When I walked into the hospital and was stopped by security. I explained that I did not know what was wrong but something was wrong with my heart. Well, nothing puts you at the head of the line faster than a nicely dressed white guy whose eyes are not dilated walking into the emergency room saying that his heart is acting funky.

I went to the head of the line and hooked up to monitors. An ER doc asked me a bunch of questions. Slowly my panic subsided. After a couple of hours one of my apartment mates came in to sit with me. I checked out fine. They diagnosed me as having a "panic attack" coupled with dehydration. Years later I learned that it wasn't a panic attack and dehydration but paroxysmal atrial fibrillation. No known cause; it just happens.

I was released late in the early evening hours. My apartment mate walked back to the apartment with me. I was so relieved, so excited to simply be alive that the air seemed fresher, the smell of the city sweeter, and the colors brighter. I felt as if I was walking on air. A panhandler stopped me and asked for change. Ordinarily I don't give money to panhandlers but it was different that evening. So overjoyed by my good fortune that I took all of the change out of my pocket and handed it to him. My cup of Gratitude runneth over and my Generosity knew no bounds!

There is a footnote to this story. When I got back to the apartment I was told that I needed to call my wife. Boy, was that a call. This was before cell phones. She had called just to check in and when my apartment mates told her that I was not there, AND that I left a note saying that I went to the hospital because I wasn't feeling well, her mind went wild. She was at home with two young children and had no idea what was going on! I think that we can laugh about that now, but I'm not sure.

In any case, for the longest time I carried with me what I called my "Jesus dollar" - money that I would give to a panhandler when asked.

I thought about that incident as I reflected upon today's gospel lesson in light of the sacraments we celebrated today; the baptism of a child and the sharing of communion. In today's lesson we have two responses to Jesus and an insight into the very nature of gratitude.

First, there is Mary. Immediately preceding today's lesson Jesus called Mary's brother Lazarus back from the dead and out of the grave. Without Lazarus, Mary and her sister Martha would have found themselves in desperate straights. Jesus gave them a new beginning, a new start, renewed hope in the Future. The world looked much brighter when Jesus had dinner with them. Mary could not contain herself. Her Joy, her Gratitude for what Jesus had done was so great there was nothing that she would not have done for him. Jesus had literally changed not only her life but her Future. Wanting to do something to express her boundless Joy and Gratitude Mary poured the most expensive thing that she had on Jesus feet and wiped them with her hair. The nard cost a year's salary.

As the perfumed aroma of Gratitude filled the air, the smell of Judas Iscariot's judgment mixed with the scent. "Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor, " he pointedly asked.

I have often marveled at how some people are critical of the generosity of others. Like Judas they usually clothe their criticism in the cloak of Responsible Stewardship and seasoned with a dash of false Piety. I often wondered why this is true.

Is it because they wish that they could be generous? Or is it because they feel judged by the generosity of others? Maybe they're afraid that they will be asked to re-evaluate their priorities. Perhaps they are ashamed or embarrassed at how little they do. I don't know, but Judas' comment is all too human and all too common.

Jesus saw Judas' criticism for what it was; Judas did not really have concern for the poor--or at least not enough concern to do something meaningful about it. That is why Jesus responded to Judas' snide remark saying, "You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. Or do we? Let's think about that for a moment or two.

Jesus disciples may not have been literate. At that time documents and manuscripts had to be handwritten. Throughout the whole Roman Empire once scholar noted that less than 10% of the population were literate. But their illiteracy does not mean that they were not educated. They knew the Torah--the Pentateuch or first five books of our Bible. And they would have recognized that Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy when God said, "You will always have the poor in your midst; therefore, I command you to open wide your hand to the needy." (15:11) In other words, care for them; don't ignore them or blame them or cast aspersions upon them. They, too, are God's children, created in God's image. "There, but for the grace of God goes I." (John Bradford, circa 1510-1555)

In an earlier gospel written at an earlier time Jesus told a parable about the Son of Man. When he comes, Jesus said, he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. To those at his right hand he shall say, "Come, O blessed ones, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

And they will reply, "When did we do any of those things?"

"Ah," they will be told, "when you did it to any of the least, you were also doing it unto me!" (Matthew 25: 31-46)

My wife is fond of saying that no one should be surprised to learn that you go to church. By that she means that your life has been so touched by Jesus in such a way that you show it. People who have been touched by God's Scandalous Grace have a different quality about them. They see things differently. They see the world differently than other people do. Some would say that they are naive. But I am not so sure that they are.

Kenny Meisner was a member of a church I served in Iowa years ago. In the midst of a career in business he decided to become a Presbyterian minister. He enrolled in Dubuque's dual program and lived on campus. While there he met a student from Asia who was learning to drive so that he could get a license. Several students tried to work with him but quickly gave up either out of frustration or fear because I think that like a new driver, he was a bit erratic, let's say. In any event, Kenny took over and when the fellow student got his license he said to Kenny, "You were not like everyone else. You didn't quit. You believed in me. You were different. Why?" Surprised, Kenny replied with his characteristic laugh, "Well, I'm a Christian."

When we've been touched by Christ we aren't wasteful but we are extravagant. We are different. We are grateful.

The Old Testament prophet Micah asked, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? That is a question for the ages, isn't it? How should I respond to a generous God? That depends; how great is your Gratitude?"

To God be the glory. Amen.