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March 17, 2013 (West Covina UMC)

John 12:1-8

Great Love

On Wednesday at Bible Study we talked about many things. I am finding that this is a great group for digressions and making random leaps and it really is very interesting and wonderful!

Of course we talked about the new pope, since his election had just been announced. We talked about many other things as well, including the quote from Mother Teresa ---“We can do no great things, only small things with great love.”

Before we left, someone said, “You should use this for Sunday’s sermon.”

I apologize if you, whoever you are, were speaking tongue-in-cheek, and I also apologize if you were referring to another part of our discussion, but this is what I have been thinking about since Wednesday.

As a result, the sermon title printed in the bulletin on Wednesday morning is no longer appropriate. Instead, this sermon's title is "Great Love."

When I first began teaching, working with kids who had severe to profound disabilities, there were many days when not a lot of teaching got done. Many of the children had medical problems, including seizure disorder, and a few had behavior challenges, so some days my assistant and I went from emergency to emergency and the basics like eating and we didn't get any more done than that.

On those days we would stop at some point while we were getting the kids ready to go home, and look at each other and sigh.

I don't know who said it first, but it became our habit to say to each other,

"We can only do what we can only do!"

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Or, as Mother Teresa said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love."

Believe me, we did a lot of small things. Sometimes we just sat with a child having a seizure. Sometimes we wiped noses. Sometimes we sat holding a child while he or she cried.

We could only do what we could only do----with great love. And I cherish the memories of those days, because of that love.

In our passage from the gospel according to John this morning, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume---so expensive it cost about a year's salary!

Judas Iscariot complains. They could have fed the hungry a lot of food for the money that perfume cost! What a waste! John writes that Judas was just worried about lining his own pockets, but really, he had a point.

Wasn't feeding the poor more important than buying perfume and then putting it on someone's feet, even if we are talking about the feet of Jesus Christ??

But Mary was doing a small thing with great love.

She wasn't trying to wipe out hunger in the world. She wasn't trying to feed the 5,000 or make a huge difference in the lives of the poor.

She was only trying to show Jesus how much she loved him!

It wasn't a waste. Judas was mistaken in that.

Nothing is a waste when it expresses your love to the one you love with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Mary was doing a small thing, anointing Jesus' feet, and she was doing it with great love.

But we shouldn't take Jesus' words as meaning that we should give up on feeding the poor. In too many other places in scripture we are commanded to serve the poor and the needy.

He was only saying that, in this instance, she should go ahead and show him in a very tangible way how much she loved him.

Jesus was God, yes, but he was also human, and undoubtedly, as he faced his own death and the outright hatred of others, he NEEDED to know that he was loved very much, without anything being held back.

And because Mary did that small thing with great love, I believe that he was strengthened by that love to continue on the course of events that led to the cross.

And here is another part of this story----

We all know that a lot of good people help the hungry. A lot of secular groups---high school classes, businesses, service clubs, etc.--- collect food for the hungry and do other charity work.

I think that probably last week when SO MANY of you participated in the Crop Walk, you walked side by side with people who were part of organizations other than churches. Right?

So there are many motivations for serving others, caring for others.

What we see in Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet, in her great and overpowering love of Jesus Christ, is what makes us different from those other groups.

Our reason, our motivation for our own care for others, begins with our love for Jesus Christ. From that love, we answer the call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

From that love, we are strengthened and inspired to do, not great things, but small things with great love!

Going on the Crop Walk was a terrific thing to do, but it did not solve hunger. There are still hungry people in the world, and it is still true what Jesus said---

“The poor you will always have with you.”

No matter how many of you go walking, no matter how much food we give to food banks, no matter how much money we give in the offering so that some of it goes to help feed the hungry and serve the poor---

The poor we will always have with us.

We can do no great things, we can only do small things with great love. We can help, but we cannot end the problem.

If Mary had sold that expensive perfume and given the money to the poor, their poverty, their hunger would have been alleviated. It would have made some difference.

But her anointing of Jesus, her tremendous love for him, made a difference to him, and to her!

She could only do what she could only do----show him that love. She couldn't stop him from being arrested or going to the cross. She couldn't keep him safe.

She did a small thing with great love. And Jesus was saying that it was the right thing to do.

Shortly before this anointing, Jesus had raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, from the dead. Martha had showed her gratitude by having a party in honor of Jesus and serving the guests. Mary, though, preferred to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him. And then later she anointed his feet.

There was no way she could ever repay him for bringing her brother back to life, so

She could only do what she could only do.

She showed her love with her actions, something that would not save Jesus from being crucified, but at least it was a small way that she could demonstrate her great love for him!

Today, we can show our love---we can do small things with great love by doing things like Crop Walk, by caring for God's house, by caring for each other, and in so many other ways!

If we love Jesus Christ as much as we say we do, sometimes we might be overwhelmed but often we will be moved to realize how much Jesus has done for us and then we need to do something----we need to do what is in our power to do. We need to act out that love!

How will we do that? It's an individual thing. Each one of us is called to serve Jesus and serve others in our own ways, but I will tell you this----doing nothing is not an option. God has given us a great gift in the person of Jesus Christ---a gift of love and grace and forgiveness and eternal life.

We have all been resurrected by Jesus from lives of meaningless or hopelessness or darkness or whatever dead end we have been in or would have been in without Jesus. How do we say thank you? How do we say I love you?

How do we do a small thing for Jesus with great love? What is it that you can only do?

Doing nothing is NOT an option. Just giving money is not an option. Spending your time, your love, your SELF----that is what Jesus wants from us.

He doesn't expect us to do great things.

He only expects us to do what we can do---small things with great love.

When I was teaching and I did what I could do, even when it seemed very small and inadequate, I know it made a difference to those children for that day. And the next day I would do it all over again. I knew I could not heal those children's minds and bodies. I could only do what I could only do.

And it was enough.

Every day, go out and do whatever it is you can do---small things
with great love.

And God knows, Jesus knows, it will be enough.

Amen.