



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
Ann Arbor | Michigan

## Sermons from

### **“LOVE WITH URGENCY, NOT WITH HASTE”**

The Rev. Evans McGowan  
March 17, 2013 - 8:00a.m.  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Isaiah 43:16-23  
John 12:1-8

*3 boxes, 3 months, 3 days...*

In January I was in the Philippines with 12 other members of the Philippines Task Force. We take a trip to a town called Dumaguete every two years, and do a lot of fundraisers in between to raise money and gather items for the work that we do. One of our projects is a sewing cooperative, so in October we collected and shipped 3 huge 3 foot by 3 foot boxes full of fabric material over to the Philippines. [Point to box.] We hoped the boxes would arrive before we made our trip in January, but as each month passed, we heard different reports about the shipment's progress and it wasn't looking very good. We knew in the past it could take many months for shipments to make it halfway across the world, and even sometimes shipments were lost. Some of us dreaded the worst.

Finally it came time to leave for our trip, and we boarded the plane with a couple of sewing machines, not knowing if we would have any fabric to use with the women. We arrived to shiny happy people wholly embracing us as long-lost friends. We felt we had arrived a little empty-handed, what with having the sewing machines but not the fabric material. That's when we heard the good news: the 3 boxes had arrived just 3 days prior to our arrival! We were able to run our sewing workshop with the women and establish a women's cooperative to make clothes for their families and sell in the market.

In the context of that story, when we feared the past knowledge of delayed and lost shipments indicated what would happen in the present, these words from Isaiah bring great comfort: **“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”** God certainly had found a way to create a little humor and perhaps test our faith in a small way. Indeed, we joined the jackals and the owls in praising God, just as Isaiah writes, I gave "drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise."

Yet is our praise only lip-service? How quickly do we forget God's good graces and move onto the next thing. We had much to do in the Philippines, and now that the material was there, we got to work training the women how to sew, making various clothing items and attending to other projects like the community center we were building, painting and dental work. Indeed, Isaiah continues past the reading we heard, speaking for God and saying, **"You have not ... honored me with your sacrifices. ... You have not ... lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses** (Isaiah 43:22-24 NIV). If our praise is not back by "the fat of our sacrifices," if we go back to our lives as if the miracle observed or grace received was just a blip on the radar, if our hearts are not changed to open up in gratitude to God continually... then God's grace did not have its intended effect.

Each day at the worksite in the Philippines, I led the group and the workers in a brief devotional. On the last day, one of the workers - Fernando - came up to me with his hat off, I thought out of respect or deference. In broken English, he communicated to me that he appreciated what I had shared that day, and as a token of his gratitude, he wanted to offer me his hat. [Show hat.] This hat is incredibly made, tightly hand-woven with local banana leaves in a beautiful pattern that must have taken days to make. I'm not sure if he made it himself or not, but one certainly couldn't purchase it in stores. I was flabbergasted by his generosity, and somewhat sheepishly and profusely grateful accepted his extravagant gift. I didn't just hear his thanks in my ears - I felt his gratitude in my heart.

I felt like I had nothing to give him in return. But he had already received something that went beyond words or a gift. People sometimes ask about the money spent on traveling to the Philippines - wouldn't the money be better spent sending it over there and going directly to the people who need it? Perhaps it would be. Yet in a world where we send our discarded goods and even trash to this part of the world, in a world where we are too busy with business or own *busyness* to take time to be with people, isn't it a rare and extravagant gift to travel so far to be with people who are so grateful? All I can say is I felt honor and blessed all around by the opportunity to go to the Philippines and for this man to bless me with an extravagant gift.

I wonder what Jesus was feeling when Mary gave her extravagant gift of perfume. I think she knew just as well as Judas how much it was worth - a year's wages! Yet she did not hold back. In a lavish act she pours the perfume not on his head as if to anoint a king, but servant-like, bending down to pour it on his feet, as if preparing a body for burial. And then she wipes the excess perfume with her hair, in a world where having loose hair meant you were a loose woman.

There is something new springing in forth in the desert. There is water in the wasteland. Do you not perceive it? Mary sees it. She sees the journey to Jerusalem and Jesus' impending death. "Until death do us part." She realizes the sacrifice that Jesus is making, and honors what he is about to do with "the fat of her sacrifice" - a year's wages.

Jesus will soon be sentenced to death. He is a dead man walking, and where is the victory in that? As one man on death row said a decade ago, "Tonight we tell the world that there are no second chances in the eyes of justice [ ... ] Tonight, we tell our children that in some instances, in some cases, killing is right [ ... ] No one wins tonight. No one gets closure. No one walks away victorious." [*Napoleon Beazley, Executed May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2002, in Texas, age 25. He was 17 when he was convicted of a carjacking-murder of 63 year old John Luttig.*]

Jesus is a dead man walking. Sister Helen Prejean is a real-life nun featured in the movie *Dead Man Walking* and played by Susan Sarandon. In the movie she says to Sean Penn's character Michael, **"I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you."**

For this dead man walking, Sister Helen and Mary bother become the face of love in the face of death. Sister Helen goes on to say, **"I saw the suffering and I let myself feel it... I saw the injustice and was compelled to do something about it. I changed from being a nun who only prayed for the suffering world to a woman with my sleeves rolled up, living my prayer."**

She goes on to say: **"Lavish love on others; receive it gratefully when it come to you. Cultivate friendship like a garden. It is the best love of all. "**

The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Cor 13:3 - **"If I give all I possess to the poor [and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,] but do not have love, I gain nothing."**

What lavish gift are we withholding? Where have we criticized extravagance when perhaps we should be celebrating what the extravagance honors? Where might we open up our hearts to give abundantly?

I would like to end with these closing lines from Mumford & Sons, a spiritual bluegrass band:

***Do not let my fickle flesh go to waste  
As it keeps my heart and soul in its place  
And I will love with urgency  
But not with haste***

Love with urgency, not with haste. Love with urgency, not with haste. I hear Mary saying these words. I hear Jesus saying these words. I hear all of us saying these words. Love with urgency, not with haste.

As the women opened the boxes and sorted through the fabric, one piece in particular caught my eye. I asked if one of them could make a dress out of the fabric, and on the last day they presented to me this beautiful dress to give to my wife, Emily. [Show dress.] It felt a little extravagant, what with shipping it halfway across the world, then flying there to handpick the fabric and design, and then finally fly back with it. Of course it wasn't my only purpose being there, nor the only thing I brought back(!). But the dress spoke of my wife's dancing phoenix spirit, and it was a gift I wanted to give.

With each passing day we take a step further from our birth and a step closer to our death. The time is nigh. Don't withhold your gift. Say what you need to say. Do what you need to do. Say it with words or better yet, extravagant action, with "the fat of your sacrifice." Don't just give and receive a blessing - BE the blessing for others.

In the strength of the Spirit that sustains us, Amen.

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