

**It's Something Already—John 12 1-8**  
*(April 3, 2022—5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent)*

A four year old child is in the care of his grandmother, to keep him occupied while she takes a call, she outfits him in an over-sized shirt, sets out the paint, brushes and some old newspapers on top of which there sits a fresh dollar store canvas. So intent and focused is he on his creation that he doesn't even notice when Grandma comes back into the room. She stands there, just inside the doorway, a while watching in quiet contentment. Finally she give a little cough so as not to startle him and not being able to make sense of what she is seeing on the paper she asks, "what are you painting?" To which the child replies, "Its a jungle." With love and encouragment in her voice she says, "That sure is going to be something when you finish." The child forms a quizzical look on his face, and with the all the surprised certainty that comes from someone stating the obvious he replies, "Grandma, it's something already!"<sup>1</sup>

It's something already. We forget that don't we? We live our lives seemingly always looking forward, at what will be someday and miss what is going on right in front of us. It is one of the greatest regret of parenthood, to look back and see how you were constantly wishing they would move on from this or that phase and in so doing missing what was already there. It's a problem in Christianity as well. In more conservative churches Christianity often gets reduced to a reward and a destination—salvation and heaven. It's possible to become so future focused that the grace of eveyday life is missed completely. In more liberal churches it's possible to be so focused on activism, on seeing only the gap between the way things are and the way things could be, in believing that God can only be experenced in some idealized world when the kingdom finally comes, that similarly we miss what God is already doing, how God is already active in our lives and our world. Both forms of Christian practice treat faith as a way to get to a destination, an end point. I don't think that's how Jesus lived.

The story of Jesus is the story of a someone who pays attention to life as the arena of God's activity—his own life, the lives of those he encounters, in nature, in everyday experiences, in the political and economic systems of his day. He pays attention because he has this unshakeable belief and trust that God is there, that life is something already.

I believe that's some of the life giving wisdom in our faith story this morning. To be fair, Judas has a point, that is expensive stuff Mary is pouring all over Jesus' feet, some sources say the equivalent to a year's wage for a labourer. But Judas also misses the point, he is being too good, too devout to get the point, too worried about his own salvation and righteousness, too future focused. Jesus responds with an often misinterpreted statement; "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." 'Pay attention Judas, don't you see what is happening here?' It's not a fatalistic acceptance of poverty, it's about discerning the moment and not using piety or

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<sup>1</sup> I first heard this story told by former United Church of Canada Moderator the Very Reverend Peter Short.

righteousness as a distraction from what God is doing in the moment. It's not time to talk budgets Judas, it's time to value the person in front of us<sup>2</sup>. For everything there is a season.

Mary loves Jesus, she senses the impending tragedy of the road he is taking. She is moved by both grief and love, so she anoints his feet, something you did only to dead loved ones. She doesn't do it with olive oil, but with the most expensive perfume she can buy, then she wipes his feet with her hair; acts of extravagant and tender care for a friend, a teacher, a mentor, a saviour. It is a giving of herself to Jesus. Jesus is moved as well, he is paying attention and what he sees, what he feels is something sacred; the movement of the Spirit in the vulnerability, compassion and love of Mary's actions.

When we pay attention to life as the arena of God's activity, we enter what mystics call "the mystery of faith". Sometimes when we think of faith, we think of a problem that needs solving. A focus on belief gives us answers and a focus on activism gives us a plan to implement as solutions to the problem of faith. The mystery of faith is neither of these things. The life of faith is a mystery because it is a journey with God into our lives; it is simply life unfolding in a relationship of trust with the God we have come to know in Jesus. There are no certainties, just trust and companionship. It is a relationship and like all relationships, you do not know how it is going to turn out, where it is going to take you. It is a mystery that is not meant to be solved; rather it is a mystery that is meant to be lived. Living the mystery of faith is about looking at our lives, our world and looking for the Spirit's movement. It is about staying in the moment and believing that life is something already, God is there, God is here.

The late Will. D. Campbell is someone who embodies this for me. You likely haven't heard of him. The late Will Campbell was a Baptist pastor in the Southern US. He is best known for leaving a comfortable job as chaplain at the University of Mississippi in the sixties to join the American civil rights movement full-time. He was the only white person who was part of the inner circle of the movement and a close confidante of Martin Luther King Jr. That's why it was shocking to so many when after King's assassination Campbell decided to dedicate himself to ministry with poor rural southern whites, people who made up the ranks of the KKK. One writer reflecting on Campbell's life said this, "As any pastor knows, it's tough to minister to folk on both sides. Tough to minister to both the spouse who cheated and the one betrayed. Tough to visit a death-row inmate and also pray with the victims of the crime. Tough to side with the striking coal workers and also listen to the company's higher-ups within the congregation. We choose sides. It's only natural. Yet Campbell spent time with members of the Klu Klux Klan. He slowly realized that many Klansmen had a history of being oppressed—giving them something in common with the black people they vilified. He reached out to Klan members with the gospel of Christ, all the while maintaining his biblical convictions about equality and justice for all...Many of Campbell's friends in the movement for racial

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<sup>2</sup>William Loader, *First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary Lent 5*, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkLent5.htm>

equality were livid that he consorted with “the enemy.” Of course, Jesus got into trouble for eating with the wrong people, too.”<sup>3</sup> Campbell would go on to say about this decision that he had become a doctrinaire social activist, identifying with liberal sophistication, and had lost something of the meaning of grace that does include us all. He would say, “...I would continue to be a social activist, but came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides.”<sup>4</sup> For Campbell, there was a spiritual emptiness in a faith and an activism that sought God in an idealized version of reality at the expense and vilification of others, others who had also been victimized. What Campbell came to realize is that God is already present, present in the muck and imperfection of life when we engage in relationships without judgement, with genuine curiosity and with the belief that we all have the imprint of the divine on our souls.

It's something already this life of ours, God is here if we will but surrender to grace, if we will but let go of fear and ego and open vulnerability, courage, awe, wonder and beauty. It's what living the mystery of faith is all about. Faith is not a problem to be solved but a life to be engaged, in trust and in confidence that the Holy One is with us. The grace is to know the world as a God infused reality, whether in a child and their creativity, in standing up for one's dignity or allying with those who do, in seeking to love and understand those who've been driven to hate or simply fully experiencing the lavish and extravagant care of a friend. The grace is to know that there is no secular and sacred<sup>5</sup>, it's all one, it's all holy, it's all God, it's already something this life of ours. May we know this grace. Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Honeycutt, “Remembering Will Campbell”, *The Christian Century*, June 6, 2013, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2013-06/remembering-will-campbell>

<sup>4</sup> Honeycutt

<sup>5</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *The Beloved Community*, May 8, 2020, <https://cac.org/the-beloved-community-2020-05-08/>