



“Tenderness”

A homily by the Very Reverend Michael R. Ruk

Sun., Apr. 7, 2019

Gospel this week: John 12:1-8

I’m always touched by acts of tenderness. Tenderness is not a word we use that often in our modern dialog. But you know those little acts of love people show to each other.

Maybe it’s someone concerned about an elderly person getting to their car or helping them in the grocery store. Maybe it’s a parent caring for their child, making sure their wellbeing is all right. Maybe it’s a neighbor checking on someone who might be alone. Or a couple just making sure everything’s OK.

Those little acts love, those acts of tenderness, are sometimes the most beautiful thing out there, more beautiful than anything. Because they show those little acts of love that sometimes people would just disregard, because it’s not that important, it’s not that big a deal on the surface. But in actuality, those little acts of love say everything: tenderness, gentleness, love.

We live in a very, very cruel time. Cruelty seems to be almost a daily event, from the White House to the schoolhouse. Cruelty seems to be essential to what it means to survive now – how nasty you can get. And that’s dangerous. It’s very dangerous to our human being, who we are. It destroys us. It destroys us on all sorts of levels.

So today we have this gospel that’s a little out of sync. Actually, it’s a lot out of sync, because depending on how you read it, it either takes place next Friday, the day before Lazarus, or next Monday, the Monday of Holy Week. Because each gospel sees it a little different. John sees it happening after Palm Sunday, and some see it happening before.

We have a story that’s interesting. We have Martha, Mary and Lazarus together. This is after Lazarus is raised from the dead. And we have Mary, the one who is contemplative, going to the

feet of Jesus and pouring this perfume over his feet and caring for him and lavishing this gift over him. This real act of intimacy and love.

And then we have the opposite with our friend Judas. Judas is out there doing his thing, saying, “Why aren’t we spending this money?” And he wasn’t doing it because he was concerned about pinching a couple of pennies. He was doing it because he was skimming off the top.

So we have these two characters, one who has sincere love and affection, and the other with that hardness of heart we’ve talked so much about this past Lent. And they’re opposites, Mary and Judas. One showing tenderness and genuine concern, and lavishing love and affection. The other one having that stinginess, that narcissism, that destroys a person.

It’s interesting that Mother Teresa and her ministry always talk about doing little things with great love. Little things with great love. I think that’s something we need to constantly remind ourselves of. We’re all individuals with many burdens of life, family and work. But we all can do little things with great love. Little things with deep meaning and affection – with intention, with graciousness, with compassion.

Those little things of great love are far more important than anything else. We can all try to do little things that have great concern. When we see someone who has fallen off from the community, we bring them back in. When we see someone who’s needing some attention, pay attention to them. When we see someone who has fallen into despair, give them hope. Those little acts of tenderness can save the world.

A book that I read recently that’s very interesting comes from a Zen Buddhist priest. (You know my reading is all over the place.) This woman is African American and a Zen Buddhist priest, and she wrote a book called [The Way of Tenderness](#).

And in this book, she talks about the problem in this most delicate time that we’re in is that we lack connection with one another. Because we live in a little bubble, we don’t know each other’s stories. And because we don’t know each other’s stories, we don’t know each other’s brokenness.

Who is broken in our world? Maybe the question should be, who isn’t broken in our world? We’re all broken. And we don’t know how we’re broken until we get to hear each other’s stories, and connect with them. So that we can give them that sense of love and tenderness again. To show them that act of compassion, that act of mercy.

How many times we see those little acts, but we don't pay attention to them, we don't acknowledge them. Maybe we need to look more carefully at the world we live in for those signs of love and tenderness. Those little things that go on that we walk past and don't pay attention to, because they just happen. Maybe we need to see them and treasure them and hold them.

I don't know what was in Mary's mind or Judas's mind on that day when this event happened. Was Judas already being affected by that corruption that was in this heart? Was he changing at the time, was he conflicted? Was Mary so full of joy and happiness at the raising of her brother back to life again, that she was just full of gratitude and love for that good act?

We need to look at tenderness again, tenderness that can overcome the cruelty of our time. We each are charged with it, and we each can do it in a different way. We just have to be more and more attentive to, as that Zen priest was saying, the stories in each of us. The brokenness of each of us.

There's a beautiful prayer in a funeral liturgy that wells up within me, whether it's a parishioner I've known for years, or someone that I've never met. It's a prayer I think we should pray – not that we're about to die – but pray because this responds to each one of our hearts. The priest goes down to the casket or the urn, and lays their hand upon it and says this prayer:

“Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive them into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.”

Let's pray that prayer as a prayer of tenderness, a prayer of gentleness to people who sometimes forget that they are part of the flock, forget that they are part of the light, forget that they have hope. Let's embrace the way of tenderness so that we can show God's compassion and mercy in a world that's broken and many times way too cruel.