***FRAGRANT FAITH***

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-2a, 4, 7b and John 12:1-11

In my office, I have a book of cartoons entitled *The Lighter Side of Church Life.* One cartoon shows two birds sitting on a telephone wire. In the distance a massive cathedral rises out of the trees surrounding a churchyard; spires reach to the sky and tall stained-glass windows shine between flying buttresses. As they look across at this impressive work of holy architecture, one bird turns to the other and says, “*Yes, it’s quite a nest, but they only use it once a week*.” [[1]](#endnote-1) Across Europe such cathedrals dot the skylines of many towns and cities. Many of them are used for little more than that hour of worship on Sunday mornings, except perhaps to welcome occasional tourists who wander in. Others have been abandoned and now serve as coffee shops, libraries, or restaurants.

Setting aside for the moment the papal indulgences and taxing of the poor to pay for those European cathedrals, one might well ask whether there is any justification for building such grand structures in the first place. Could the money not be better used to feed the hungry or to build shelter for the homeless or to meet the needs of the poor? Some may raise the same questions about stained glass windows or magnificent organs or the rebuilding of Notre Dame. In a world of finite resources and seemingly infinite needs, how are we to be faithful stewards of the gifts God has placed in our hands?

The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks: “*What is the chief end of man?*” What is our principal purpose, our highest calling as human beings? The answer of the catechism is “*to glorify God and to enjoy God forever*.” That response echoes Paul’s direction to the Church in Corinth: “*Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God*.” If that is our chief end, our highest calling, then all that we do –

be it building a cathedral, feeding the hungry, or singing an anthem,

teaching students or learning from teachers,

healing a patient or running a business or digging a ditch –

all of it, should be done to the glory of God. We should follow in the footsteps of Olympic runner Eric Liddell, of *Chariots of Fire* fame, who ran to bring glory to God. But if everything we do is to bring glory to God, how are we to distinguish among the infinite possibilities? Do we simply do what we want and tack on the glory of God? I’ll watch basketball to the glory of God or eat cake to the glory of God or take a nap to the glory of God or maybe do all three to the glory of God.

*For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.* The writer of Ecclesiastes recognizes the rhythms of life; there are different times for different purposes under heaven. Not every time is a time to laugh; there are also times to cry. Not every day is a day to build; there are also days to tear down. There are times to speak, and times to remain silent – hard as that is for some of you to imagine. There are times to nap and times to refrain from napping – like now! And perhaps there are times to feed the hungry and other times to build cathedrals. We glorify God in many ways! Jesus healed, preached, and taught – all of which glorified God; but he also took time to go off by himself to pray; he took time to eat with sinners but also to celebrate with friends. There is a time for every matter under heaven. Which brings us to this story of Lazarus and Mary and Jesus, a story that really begins days earlier.

Lazarus was dead. Everyone agreed on that. Not mostly dead, not seemed-to-be dead, but dead dead! Dead and three days buried dead when Jesus arrived at the tomb. Jesus had delayed his arrival, anticipating what God had in mind for him there. When he finally did arrive, after being chastised by Mary and Martha for not arriving sooner, he ordered the stone to be rolled away from the tomb, looked to heaven, prayed, and then shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” It seemed an exercise in futility until, to the astonishment of all, out from the tomb walked three-day-dead Lazarus, the strips of linen cloths still wrapped around his body, the living, breathing Lazarus his friends and family had known and loved. Not long thereafter, Lazarus was sitting at the table in his own house eating dinner with the One who had called him out of the tomb. John says, “they gave a dinner for him,” and I wonder: Was it Jesus or Lazarus for whom they gave the dinner? Was the party to celebrate the return of the one who was dead and now alive, or was it to honor the One who brought him back to life?

As John tells it, the raising of Lazarus was the last straw for the chief priests who saw no way of stopping the crowds from following Jesus after they saw what he had done. It is one thing to help a lame man walk or help a blind woman see or cast out demons from a boy. It is quite another to raise a man from the dead! So, the crowds flocked to see dead-now-alive Lazarus and to see Jesus who had raised him; many came to believe in Jesus because of that miracle. That belief so worried the chief priests that they began to plot how to kill Jesus and Lazarus; Jesus was the threat, but Lazarus was the living proof of the power of God at work in Jesus. Sitting at table with Jesus in their home, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus knew nothing of those plots, but Jesus knew; he knew what was coming in the days ahead. He had told them what was coming in the days ahead!

And then, Mary did a curious thing. She took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, a fragrance worth a year’s wages for a laborer, poured it on Jesus’ feet, and then wiped his feet with her hair. It was an act of humble devotion, anointing the body of Christ with an extravagant gift, and unknowingly, anointing his body for the burial soon to come. “*The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*,” writes John. To Judas it was the stench of wasteful spending; but to Jesus, Mary, and perhaps some others, it was the aroma of a fragrant faith. Could that money have been used to help the poor? Sure, though John discounts Judas’ suggestion to that effect as motivated by greed. But Mary had a different purpose in mind – to anoint the body of her Lord in gratitude for what he had done for her brother and as an expression of her love for him. One might expect Jesus to side with Judas and protest the extravagance of the gift, but instead he says, “*Leave her alone! You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me*.”

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. There is a time for helping the poor and a time for anointing the body of the Lord! There would be other days to feed the hungry, other days to cure the lame, other days to proclaim the gospel. This was a time to be in the presence of the Lord, to kneel at his feet, and to anoint his body with fragrant perfume. In the glow of the celebration of Lazarus’ return to life there lurked the shadow of Jesus’ death. It was a time to appreciate the moment with Jesus while he was still with them and to express adoration.

Would you have recognized that time? It seems to be Mary’s gift to know when to sit and listen and when to anoint Jesus’ feet. It seems to be her gift to appreciate the time with Jesus as precious and holy, rather than take it for granted. I suspect that many of us are more Martha than Mary, running around serving others, which is also important. But there is a time for every matter under heaven – a time to be like Mary and a time to be like Martha. Mary understood the spiritual life, a life lived in the presence of the Lord, a life offering a fragrant expression of faith to the glory of God, and she modeled it for us. She was unaware that she was anointing Jesus’ body for burial; she only offered what was precious to her – rich perfume given willingly and humbly to her Lord.

What have you learned from her? Have you offered anything precious to God lately? Have you appreciated holy moments or have you been too busy? Have you ever offered anything precious to express your love for Christ and to glorify God? It need not be so valuable as nard, but it should be no less dear to your heart and no less expressive of your love. Centuries after they were first built, many of those European cathedrals still serve as houses of worship in which to glorify God. Within their walls is sacred space to pray; the towering walls and beautiful windows still proclaim the very glory of God. Today many of them are dwarfed by office buildings, hospitals, or sports stadiums – modern cathedrals of a sort that bear witness to different gods. But some endure and some host pilgrims from around the world who come to experience the holy space they create, as those who built them intended.

Today we come to this table to break bread and share a cup in remembrance of the same Lord anointed by Mary at that table just days before his death. Here we dedicate ourselves anew to his service and to God’s glory. There will be a time to feed the hungry and a time to clothe the naked and a time to help the poor. That is important time that demands from each of us faithful dedication. But this is a time to break bread, drink juice, and remember together so that we may be strengthened for that good work. Today we remember the aroma of fragrant faith offered in humility by Mary. Today we remember Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins on the cross toward which we journey. Today we remember his glorious resurrection by which we live with hope each and every day. Today we remember that as he lived, so are we to live – to the glory of God – each day, every day! Amen

1. *The Lighter Side of Church Life*, Tyndale Publishers, 1988, p.40 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)