

Sermon Lent 5C 2022: The Life of Faith is a Matter of the Heart

Introduction: It All Comes Down to Loving Jesus

Over the course of this year we, as a community, have been focusing on *Faith Matters*;

As a way for us to grow as Christians and to grow as this community on a mission
To know God in Jesus Christ and to make Christ known to others.

In our focus on *Faith Matters*, we've been learning or re-learning the faith;

We're preaching and teaching on what it is we believe as Christians;

We're learning or remembering the stories of the faith that tell us who God is;

And on what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

In focusing on *Faith Matters*, we've been concentrating on living out the faith in our daily lives;

We're talking about the life of prayer and worship, of using our gifts for God;

Of giving of ourselves for the good of others here and in the wider community

Of opening ourselves to God's presence in all areas of our lives;

In the hope of having a living faith.

Faith Matters also involves the practice of sharing our faith with others;

Of living our lives in such a way that someone would actually think we're a Christian;

We're sharing who we are and what we're about with others by our words and our deeds

In the hope and expectation that God is working through us to draw others

Into the Christian life that we are coming to know ourselves.

This is our theme for the year and as I listen to you all talk about our focus;

It's been a helpful theme so far; but as I lay it out here, this morning;

It strikes me that knowing the faith, living the faith, and sharing the faith

Seem to be more about our heads, our thinking, our doing;

And less about our hearts and that ambiguous, life-giving power we call love.

One spring, we had a new members' class with a number of current members participating;
And one of them at the last class spoke up about how the class was more than she expected;
She told us she came wanting to learn the rules about being an Episcopalian;
And while she learned "the rules", she said she also met Jesus.

One of the stories of my life that some of you know is that when I was in college;
I went to meet with my Bishop to persuade him to send me to seminary;
I talked with him about how involved I had been in the church all my life;
How I ran a youth group all through college, said my prayers;
Felt like I had some gifts that would be helpful for being a priest.

And about every five minutes into my half hour presentation;
He would put his hands together and smile and ask, "But Frank, do you love Jesus?"
Three times I responded yes and then launched into other examples
Of why I would be a good person to become a priest.

Finally, he held his hands up and asked a fourth time, "But Frank, do you love Jesus?"
I said, 'Of Course. Why do you keep asking?'
He smiled and said, "Because that's the only requirement for anyone
To be a Christian, much less a priest."

That January on a retreat with the little youth group I was working with,
We were having a conversation about why go to church or are involved with the group;
And one of the little ninth grade boys said in his squeaky, changing voice,
"Well, I just love Jesus."

For all there is to know about the faith, the many ways to practice the faith, or to share the faith;
It all comes down to a matter of the heart, your heart and my heart;
It comes down to experiencing God's love through Jesus and having a personal love for Jesus.

The Gospel and Lovers of Jesus

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus is in Bethany, a little town or suburb next to Jerusalem;

It's right before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, His betrayal and His death;

And here He is at table, at dinner, with some of His closest friends and followers;

With Lazarus, Martha and Mary and Jesus' disciples.

Just days before Jesus has raised this same Lazarus from the dead;

Bringing many people to believe and to love Jesus;

And bringing others to the decision that they need to kill Jesus;

Or have their entire world's turned upside down.

And in the home of Lazarus and his sisters, with His disciples in attendance;

We experience three people who love Jesus and who are living their lives

In response to that love, a love that clearly flows both ways.

The first is Martha who serves;

Martha who offers Jesus her love by making sure everything is just right;

Who makes sure that there is not only enough food;

But also that everyone is well cared for;

Martha's service reflects her love for Jesus, and it's a love that overflows to others.

I had a grandmother like that;

She could have thrown anything on the table and we would have eaten it;

(Did I say that she was a good cook?).

Edith Bowles expressed her love for all of us by setting a beautiful table;

By sitting you next to your favorite relatives;

By visiting with us at the children's table when we were little.

Everyone had more than enough and always some of their favorite food;
And the warmth of her personality and ease of serving made for wonderful times;
That's Martha loving Jesus and others by her service through love.

Then there's Lazarus;
Jesus friend, whom Jesus had recently raised from the dead;
Lazarus, sitting at table with Jesus; listening to Jesus' stories, asking questions;
Giving answers, passing the hummus; laughing together;
Soaking in Jesus' presence, fully attentive, sharing his love for Jesus.

Lazarus is that friend who treats you and me like we're the only
And most important person in the world when you're with them;
Interested, interesting, lovable; and in his love for Jesus, Lazarus gets it right.

And into this laughing, loving, warm dinner party comes Mary;
Who kneels at Jesus' feet, unties her hair, opens a jar of the most expensive perfume;
A perfume that would be the value of a laborer's full year of wages;
And pours it over Jesus' feet and wipes Jesus' feet with her hair;
To anoint Him as the Messiah and in preparation for Jesus' death and burial.

It may have been the anointing perfume that Mary didn't have to use for her brother Lazarus;
Because Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead;
And she now had a better, more important use on behalf of her Lord;
Who she was loving in the most extravagant fashion.

I suspect that room got very quiet and fragrant when Mary came in;
Because an unmarried woman was not allowed to let her hair down in Jesus' day;
Or because she was pouring such a costly perfume on Jesus' feet;

As the sign of her extravagant love for Jesus and all that Jesus had done for her and her family;
And all that Jesus was getting ready to do for everyone through his death and resurrection

Remember, Mary in an earlier story was the one sitting at Jesus' feet, learning;

While Martha was fussing and serving;

Perhaps Mary had some real understanding of what was coming next.

Then Judas, shocked like most of them probably were, speaks up about the waste;

About how this perfume could have been sold to help the poor;

And Jesus, noting Judas' seeming lack of love for Him in the moment;

Sets forth the key component in the life of faith.

Drawing from the Book of Deuteronomy where it says the poor will be with you always

But you will not always have me;

Jesus is stating that the love for me is at the heart of the life of faith.

And just as an aside, the quote from Deuteronomy that speaks to the presence of the poor;

Goes on to say, So be openhanded with the poor and give to them freely;

The point being that this Christian life is not about our belief set;

How we're living our lives; or even sharing the faith;

It's about our love for Jesus and the life of love that flows out from that love.

Loving Jesus

The Christian life, the life in which faith matters is a life based on the love of Jesus;

Based on a living, personal love for the Creator and Redeemer of all that is;

Based on a personal love for the One who takes away your sins and mine;

Based on a personal love for the One

Who takes away the fear and finality of death forever;

The One who promises us life now and a new life beyond the door of death.

The Christian life, the life of faith, is a life based on a personal love

For the One who gently and persistently knocks at the doors of hearts to come into our lives

How comes to us to love us and to empower us to enter the life that is really life;

Based on a foundation that is nothing more and nothing less than love.

So, as we draw near to the end of this season of Lent in the year of *Faith Matters*;

And prepare for the re-enactment of Jesus' passion and death and resurrection;

We look forward in hope to the new life God intends for all of us in faith;

Let me invite you to turn your life to the love of Jesus;

To respond to God's love with the love of your own heart;

For then and only then will we be true followers of Jesus;

And not just followers, but Jesus' friends.

Amen.