

“Acts of Devotion”
John 20:19-31
Sermon by Jan Edmiston
April 3, 2005 – 2nd Sunday of Easter

Long, long ago in a very different time and place, I was in my seminary dorm room outside Boston on an early spring morning. This was long before marriage or children or even life in the parish.

I was sitting at my desk working on a paper that would please my professors or a sermon that would please my ordination committee, when suddenly I heard music –guitar music. It sounded like it was coming from outside.

Who would be playing a radio outside while people were trying to study? We were in the throes of exam and paper time, and everyone was a little stressed-out. Who didn't know that *this was a seminary*? It was supposed to be quiet, for heaven's sake.

I got up from my desk and went to the window to see who was responsible for this noise. And what I *saw* there was not nearly as shocking as what I *heard*. Strumming on a guitar, two stories down, I saw the person

that I happened to be dating at the time who was – embarrassingly enough – serenading me. And this is what he sang:

*Be Thou my vision, O Jan of my heart;
Nought be all else to me save that Thou art,
Thou my best thought by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping Thy presence my light.*

It was sung in a much nicer voice and there were other – frankly – *more passionate* verses that followed. But almost as quickly as the *singing* began, other students began *shouting* from their windows, “Hey, keep it quiet down there! “What’s going on?” We’ve got exams tomorrow!” (Even in seminary, people can be cranky.)

I suppose I should have been flattered by this serenade. I was not the kind of girl who got this kind of attention very often. (Like *never*.)

But instead I was mortified. Did this guy really want to broadcast to the world the depth (or foolishness) of his devotion? And *why singing?*

Why not *flowers?* Or maybe he could have *washed my car*. But no, I got singing. And he almost *ruined* a perfectly good hymn for the rest of my ministry.

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Spiritually speaking, there are many passages in scripture that describe acts of devotion offered to God. Sometimes they were tangible gifts and sometimes they were actions. And more important – sometimes the acts of devotion were *appreciated by God*, and sometimes they were *not*.

You remember Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve? We are told in Genesis that Cain made an offering of *fruit* to the LORD. His brother Abel offered *meat*. Apparently, God didn't care for fruit, because, we are told, "the LORD had regard for Abel and *his* offering, but for Cain and *his* offering he had no regard."¹

Just recently, during Lent, we were reminded of the story of Mary (the sister of Martha) who took expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet with the perfume and then wiped his feet with her hair. Not only did *Judas* find this act of devotion frivolous and irresponsible, but most of us would probably *agree*.

¹ Genesis 4:1-16. Cain's job was to till the ground. Abel's job was to keep the sheep, so it was understandable that Abel would offer a sheep and Cain would offer something he grew.

The perfume cost the equivalent of a year's salary. *What was she thinking?* Apparently Jesus *knew* she was thinking: that he was leaving her soon, and she was – *figuratively* – preparing her LORD for burial.²

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What does all this have to do with that first Easter evening and Jesus' appearance to the disciples?

As Jesus was preparing to ascend into heaven, he was trying to review – for the last time with his disciples – **what is pleasing to God**, what they are supposed to do next. Throughout all Jesus' ministry, he had shown the disciples **what makes God happy**, what *they* could do to show their devotion to God:

Heal the sick.³ Care for the poor.⁴ Reach out to strangers.⁵

Love your enemies.⁶ Serve people.⁷

Push the barriers a little.⁸ Worship lavishly.⁹

² John 12:3-8. This story of a woman anointing Jesus is found in three of the four Gospels with some variation. See also: Mark 14:3-11, Matthew 26:6-13.

³ Matthew 8:14, 10:1; Mark 3:34; Luke 9:1

⁴ Matthew 25:36ff;

⁵ Luke 10:33ff; Luke 19:7

⁶ Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27

⁷ Matthew 10:45, 20:28; Mark 8:34

Pray all the time.¹⁰ Let the Holy Spirit do its work.

We hear, specifically, in this passage, that the first time Jesus' appeared to his disciples, after his resurrection, he reminded them that:

- **He was sending them out.** They were to go out and serve just as *he* had served.
- **He was equipping them with a Spirit stronger than their own:** a *Holy* Spirit that would help them.
- **They were expected to forgive each other** so that *they* might be unburdened as well. (We can imagine that there was a lot of forgiving to do: forgiving each other for abandoning their Lord in his time of need, forgiving the authorities who were after them to the point that they were hiding behind locked doors.)

“Peace be with you,” Jesus said. These things would bring peace.

Now Thomas (the only disciple who was a twin) had missed this first appearance. But Jesus appeared *again*, a week later, and Thomas was given the opportunity to touch and see for himself that Jesus was risen!

What really *pleased* God, though, were those who could believe even without touching and seeing. It's not easily achieved. We are a people who

⁸ Matthew 9:10,

⁹ Mark 14:3; Luke 12:33

¹⁰ Luke 18:1;

– like Thomas – need evidence. We *need* to see. We *need* to touch. We need to feel something if not *externally*, then *deep inside*.

Acts of devotion help us here.

Most of us go through life, go through *worship* in neutral. We coast.

We sing “Thine is the Glory” as if we are dying for it to end. It’s not *a love song* for us. We are not aware that we are serenading God as an act of devotion. Imagine the way we would sing if we realized that we are broadcasting for all the world the depth (or foolishness) of our love. We don’t care who knows about it! We’re going to sing for everyone to hear it!

We forget that when we serve our family, our neighbors, our co-workers, we are vicariously serving God. We are offering **acts of devotion** to the One who gave us breath.

When we volunteer for people in need, when we stop to help a stranger, when we take time for a child – we are expressing **acts of devotion**

to God. Most of the time, we are simply plodding along, acting as if life is an utter *chore*, rather than a love affair with our Maker.

Or even worse – we offer things to God that God doesn't want.

God doesn't want us to fly planes into buildings. To say that this pleases the Creator is a lie.

God doesn't want us going to war against other faithful people and calling it good. God doesn't want us step over people ruthlessly to make a name for ourselves so that we can ultimately give God the credit for our success.

God doesn't want us to pray in front of cameras and then call our enemies names, stirring up violence instead of understanding.

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All we have to do is *know what Scripture teaches* – to study how Jesus lived – and then we can see what actions and gifts God loves the most. The Psalms offer great gift ideas:

- Singing to the Lord is always a good idea.¹¹ God loves to be serenaded.
- (Burnt offerings are *not* especially appreciated.¹²)
- Prayer and acts of kindness?¹³ **Yes.** God loves those.
- (Gossiping or conspiring with God against someone? **No.**¹⁴)

Just look at Jesus if we want to know exactly what pleases God. And the amazing thing is that God continues to give us gifts, God continues to offer acts of devotion to us.

That ultimate act, of course, was on the cross. God gave us his only begotten Son so that we might know to what depths God would go to love us and save us. And now that the cross is empty and Christ is risen, we see that there is more: **God wants us to have *life*.** God wants us to have life in Christ's name.

I can't finish this sermon without talking about the new pipe organ. It's that big, beautiful musical instrument behind you, that we will dedicate officially this afternoon at 4:00. Some have said that it was too expensive,

¹¹ Psalm 100:1, 101:1, 149:1

¹² Psalm 40:6

¹³ Psalm 111, 112

¹⁴ Psalm 101:5

too frivolous a purchase – we could have given that money to the poor! But it will be dedicated today as an act of devotion to God.

Some made contributions in honor of someone they loved, or in memory of someone they loved deeply. What a wonderful tribute. But ultimately, it is given to God's glory because *God loves to be serenaded* with gorgeous music. The best tribute we can continue to offer through that organ is *to sing as if we mean it*, as if we are actually singing to God. Because we are.

To sing, to dance, to teach an unemployed person computer skills or a child to read, to cook dinner for the homeless – even to present ourselves for baptism – all these things are acts of devotion to the One who was first devoted to us.

God's devotion is symbolized in this meal we will enjoy. *Our* devotion will be symbolized in **the way we worship** *within* these walls and **the way we live** when we go *outside* these walls today.

Let us pray: For peace, for faith, for the ability to believe even when we can't see or touch any evidence to support our belief – O Lord, for these things we pray. Make us ready to present ourselves to you as a living, breathing offering of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

