

***Your People* – John 12:1-8**
Rev. Matt Nieman
April 13, 2025 (Palm Sunday)

Today, for those of you staying for brunch after worship, you'll be exposed to good food. It will nourish our bellies. It will be tasty and go a long way to curbing our hunger in a delightful way.

You'll have the opportunity to sit among others today and interact over your meal. You may gravitate toward a table that includes those in the church you may know—either well or casually. Or, you may drift toward wherever the open seats are. And as you sit down, others will join you and you will chat with people you've only seen but never met or those who will be complete strangers to you.

Whether you dine with good friends today or total strangers, the hope is that you would feel connected to others here—not necessarily because of close friendships but because you're among those today who value the story of why we gather. And that story has to do with Jesus, who he is, what he's done, and the hope he brings us.

I suspect that next Sunday, Easter Sunday, you'll also do something similar. You'll dine with others. Most likely, those folks won't be strangers to you. There'll be some other tie that binds you—as family or friends. And the occasion of having a meal together will allow you to grow or maintain the relationships you already have.

Throughout the Lenten season, we've looked at how Jesus did incredible things in the context of meals or banquet tables. And often, he revealed himself, including his love for the poor

and the outcast, by doing things or telling stories that emphasized everyone's inclusion in the family of God.

This story here in John today is a story whose characters are connected to each other intimately. They're like family, really. In fact, three of them at the meal are siblings: Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Jesus has a history with them that would reveal he's really a member of their family.

Just before this meal together in John, for example, Jesus had risen Lazarus from the dead. Mary and Martha, who had a close relationship with Jesus already, had summoned Jesus to come and be with them after Lazarus had died. When he arrived, and before he went to the tomb to bring Lazarus back to life, Jesus joined in their grieving. He wept too, John tells us, having been troubled and deeply moved. Those folks were like family to him.

And now here, in John 12, they're gathered again at Lazarus' house. Jesus is the guest of honor. Martha has prepared a meal, and Lazarus was at the table, as was their sister Mary. And in an extraordinary act of devotion, Mary pours some expensive perfume on Jesus feet and wipes them with her hair.

That gesture was not reserved for a stranger, but for someone who was valued and known and treasured. There was a tight bond between the four of them. And Mary reveals that in this extravagant act.

We can't escape the love that was present among them. Mary's pouring of the perfume reflects the love she had for him. And it was no doubt in response to the great love Jesus had for her and for all in that room, including Judas who chastised Mary for wasting such an expensive commodity and, of course, who would go on to betray Jesus.

Reciprocal love is the theme around that table that day. As Jesus would then go on to make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem the next day on the back of the donkey amid branches waving, which would be the beginning of the end of Jesus' ministry, this meal had to embolden Jesus. In advance of what he knew was coming for him, to sit and love and be loved was not insignificant. He no doubt found it feeding his soul to be sitting with loved ones around that table.

And it may have even been somewhat of a surprise to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus to have such a meaningful and intimate interaction with Jesus that evening. It reminds us that moments of special joy or intimacy often are sprung when we aren't prepared for them.

The author and former Methodist bishop Will Willimon once wrote that many of our [spiritual] practices are attempts to take time for God on our own terms, when, in fact, God "takes time for us and interrupts us, throughout the day, if we have the eyes of faith to see it. God takes time from us. God does not wait for us to fine-tune the spiritual disciplines. God grants us the freedom to be about our vocations in the world, doing what we have to do in this life. Then God suddenly shows up, unexpectedly becomes an event in our time, disrupts our lives."

Those interruptions take place, often, when we're with "our people," the people we're closest to—around tables or on walks or on family vacations or church mission trips or choir rehearsals or...you name it.

We gather strength and increase resilience when we're amid our people—as narrow or as broad of a group as that may be.

It is a strange time in our culture. There has been so much disruption going on in our government (for worse or for better,

depending upon your perspective). And it's really leading more and more people to become nervous or apprehensive or anxious over what's happening or coming next.

In fact, I read this week that there's a growing segment of the population that is readying itself for a crisis or calamity they see coming down the road, due to war, civil unrest, or extreme weather.

We've all heard of preppers, right? They're people who prepare themselves for long-term self-sufficiency by raising or growing their own food or storing supplies in bulk. In contrast, these *new* groups of prepared citizens aim to be ready for a sudden calamity of some sort.

And they are preparing themselves by getting training on firearms, other preparedness training, and lessons on being mentally prepared for a disaster.

Now, there are many of us who believe in disaster preparedness. We have a disaster preparedness plan at the church, for example. And yet, it feels these kinds of training classes that are becoming more prevalent around the country play off people's fears and assume great unrest among neighbors if some sort of calamity happens, rather than relying on cooperation and loving kindness amid neighbors.

It's a far cry, it seems, from what we find among Jesus, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. They were among their people. And when we see our neighbors as "our people" rather than as adversaries, we're more inclined to find more cooperation and coming together.

I was with Joey and some of his classmates this week in Nashville for the All State Music Festival. Kids audition early in the year for this opportunity to sing or play with some of the best

musicians in the state. And if they make All State, they rehearse and perform a concert at the annual Tennessee Music Educators Association gathering.

When musicians are together, they're for sure with their people. And that was noticeable in so many ways as I walked around the Opryland Hotel amid hundreds of them over three days.

One day, I was waiting for our kids to come out of their rehearsal. And as I was waiting against a wall in the hallway, the kids started to spill out of their rehearsal rooms. And a group of boys came out. And they were clearly in their element. On a high from the music they had just been rehearsing, they were somewhat giddy as to how things were coming together for them—bouncing around and being loud. And as they stilled near me, I heard one of the boys distinctly say, "This week is so awesome! I'm not gonna want to go home. Nobody's going to be at home anyway."

I don't know what he meant by that comment. Hopefully, all it said was that his parents would simply be out of town that night and that he would be by himself until they returned on Sunday morning. My prayer was that the comment didn't hide something deeper, either neglect or, more likely, a family life just lacking in cohesion or inclusion.

With those guys, and within that deeper community of musicians, this young man had his place. And his buddies loved him, as he loved them.

It's with your people that you find the greatest love.

The orchestrator of this love is the God, who in the person of Jesus, yearns to love *his* people.

It is reported that before Jimmy Stewart left to fight overseas with his bomber squadron in World War II, his father, an Indiana, Pennsylvania, hardware store owner and staunch Presbyterian, slipped a note into his son's pocket. The note read: "My dear Jim boy, soon after you read this letter, you will be on your way to the worst sort of danger.... I am banking on the enclosed copy of the 91st Psalm. The thing that takes the place of fear and worry is the promise of these words.... I can say no more.... I love you more than I can tell you. Dad." -- "The Boy Next Door," McCall's, January 1998, 38.

The 91st Psalm? Here are a few of the promises to which Jimmy Stewart's father referred: "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them and show them my salvation."

(91:14-16)

God with *God's* people—always.

May our lives be wrapped in the beauty of connection—today, this week, and beyond, with those who fill our tables.