

This message was delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, the twentieth day of October in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. It was Pamela's final sermon to her people before her retirement.

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was chaotic and useless and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a spirit from God swept over the face of the waters.
Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.
And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night.
And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

I Corinthians 12:4-7

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same LORD;
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Isaiah 43:18-21

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Good News of John 14:23-27

23 Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Heavenly Parent will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.
24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words;
and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the One who sent me.
25 "I have said these things to you while I am still with you.
26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Heavenly Parent will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.
27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Good News of Mark 14:1-9

1 It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him;
2 for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."
3 While Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.
4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way?
5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor."
And they scolded her.
6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.

7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.

8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Our Bible story for today is a goodbye story.

It is about ritual and remembering; service and sacrifice; relationship and release.

Jesus thought he had made it clear that he was leaving, but his disciples were not hearing it; well, at least not all of them. One however took him quite seriously, listening to his words about departure and about death.

We don't really know how the woman came to have a very expensive ointment.

Some think she was a woman of the night to the rich and powerful.

Others that she came from a wealthy family with a substantial inheritance.

Perhaps she had a booth in the market place and set aside a little money week after week and year after year and decade after decade so that her family would have what it needed for her own burial.

If you calculate your yearly wages before taxes, you will get a pretty accurate idea of what the woman sacrificed. Giving that amount of money
to the poor or the ill,
to the hospital or the city library
or the county fair board or Otsego schools
or the Presbytery or the PCUSA missions or just about anywhere else would be more logical.
But this story is not about logic, it is about loving.

Here's an odd thing about the story: Jesus says, "Truly I tell you that wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

In remembrance of her!—We don't even know her name!

Oh well... Perhaps whenever the story is told the angels sing her name.

I have been convinced for some time now that the reason this story is to be told wherever the Good News of God is proclaimed is because this story is the very essence of God's story.

The woman in the story is the "God figure".

You see God takes the best,

the finest,

the holiest,

the most treasured and pours it out for you—for you... for you and for your friend and your enemy and your children and your boss;

Jesus Christ, God the Child, pours out God's life

for creation and cosmos;

for sinners and saints;

for the arrogant and the agnostic;

for the one who complains and the one who compliments;

for the cranky and the kind;

the judgy and the just;

for the one who stays and the one who leaves.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus makes it clear that there is a difference between leaving and leaving someone alone. "I am sending you the Advocate", the Comforter, the Spirit of God who sweeps over us like a mother bird sweeps over her nest.

Before this building was here,
the Spirit of God was sweeping over Chief Tontogany and his adopted son.
Before the first infant was baptized the Spirit of God was blessing the waters.
Before Mrs. Amos told the first Bible story,
The Spirit of God was smiling over them.
Before the first casket rested in the front of the church,
the Spirit of God was comforting the dying.
Before the first note was played
or the first pitch sung
or the first prayer said
or the first tear wiped away
the Spirit, the Sweet, sweet Spirit of God was here and she will be here on this corner and in this place long
after I leave and after you have suffered death and after baby Lana's skin is wrinkled and her hair grey and her
children's children go out into the world to proclaim Jesus' love.

No, we do not have a god who leaves us alone,
but One who is present;
One who is listening to your heart's deepest longing and your spirits highest hope;
One who calls you into faith;
One who grows in your spirit fruits that nourish and strengthen your presence in work, in school, in home and in
worship with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
You have the God who has chosen you and
poured creativity and beauty into you with lavish and unmeasured delight;
One whose generous gifts to Tontogany are really quite outrageous and might be seen as illogical by those who
would instruct God to distribute things differently!

O sisters and brothers of Togany, you have One who longs to gather you as a mother hen gathers her chicks.
One whose very self is emptied out in love for you.
One who calls into existence things that do not yet exist.
One who was anointed for burial, yes, for death,
but whose story does not end in death, but in resurrection;
not in hopelessness but in an eschatological imagination where the people of God flourish and the justice of
God brings praise.

Praise from the most ornery jackal and the most clueless ostrich,
where the most wild and the most wayward bow at the name of Jesus and finally see that God's grace is a fount
of infinite blessing and God's love an eternal extravagance of mercy from everlasting to everlasting.
This is the Spirit who is with you Tontogany.
This is the Spirit who remembers your name.
For in life and in death you belong to God.

Now may your God who is present with you in Spirit
Sing into your hearts comfort and peace
Build into your bodies honor and strength
Paint into your minds hope and humility
Soak into your spirits mystery and holiness
And blow into your community and your world

Light,
Glory,
Beauty
&
Joy

Now and for a thousand generations!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Amen!