

Sunday - February 6, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon - **Jesus Manifesto IV**

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As we conclude our journey through *Jesus Manifesto*, we're going to look at the one place Jesus was always welcome: Bethany.

If we think of the places Jesus went, we discover that there was often serious opposition to his teachings. There were always people who just wanted him to leave. Once, a crowd wanted to push him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). Other times, a crowd was ready to stone him (John 8:59 and 10:31).

The hostility he faced in Jerusalem was palpable. The leaders in the Temple couldn't get rid of him fast enough. Even in his hometown of Nazareth where he spent his childhood, he found such a lack of faith that it hindered his ministry of healing: **"Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and their own house." And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.** (Matthew 13:57-58)

But, in Bethany, he was consistently welcomed. He had friends there: Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha; and Simon the Leper.

So, let's look at an odd question, but an important one: How do we become Bethany?

1. Receive and Welcome Christ - We start by inviting Jesus into our lives. But, there is more than that. Jesus is more than a guest at Bethany. He becomes the master of the house. For this to happen in us, we must receive his entire ministry: preaching, teaching, healing, suffering, caring for the poor and oppressed, reaching the lost with the Gospel. We accept that these are the things Christ is

commanding us to do today, and we have to add to this the even more difficult task of receiving and welcoming all who belong to Jesus Christ. All. No picking and choosing. If Jesus becomes master of our home, everyone for whom he was crucified comes with him.

2. Become His Disciples - Here is a story to illustrate this very important concept:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village (Bethany), where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who *sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying*. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. *Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.*" (Luke 10:38-42)

Poor Martha - who had started all this by welcoming Jesus and his motley band of disciples into her home - is stuck in the kitchen while Jesus is teaching his disciples...AND MARY!!!! Mary was acting like a man, like a disciple of the Master. It was scandalous! She was *way* out of line, and not helping Martha in the kitchen is the least of it.

Mary was refusing to be kept "in her place." She was a pioneer for women who followed Jesus. And Jesus affirmed her radical and impudent decision to be one of the boys. I would imagine this was the sort of thing the first woman in medical school faced, or the first woman in a law school, the first woman to coach a men's team (in any sport, at any level), or the first woman in seminary, the first woman to seek ordination.

Mary behaved like a disciple, because she WAS a disciple. She was determined not to hide her calling behind social norms and expectations. Her greatest priority in her life was to know Jesus better. And, that's what being a disciple is all about. If we want to be disciples of Jesus Christ, we need to live as though we believe that relationship is the most important thing in our lives.

3. Love and Befriend Jesus - Martha welcomed Jesus and his disciples in her home as a friend. Jesus desires friends more than he desires slaves. He wants to treat us like friends and he wants us to treat him like a friend: **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you *slaves* any longer, because the *slave* does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”** (John 15:13-15)

4. Be a Place of Death and Resurrection - Bethany is the place where Lazarus lived and died and was brought back from the dead. We should all know the story of Lazarus. But, are we thinking that this is a lesson for us? that resurrection can follow only suffering and death?

The cross is central to the Body of Christ. We - individually and as a congregation - experience death in many forms: dry spells when nothing has the meaning it used to, sufferings with one another (either sharing or causing suffering), death to our agendas and aspirations and opinions and preferences, times of crisis. There are many ways for parts of the false self to die.

It is out of these deaths, this dying, that the Lord's life is expressed and God builds his house. Every crisis we face is a resurrection opportunity, every catastrophe an opening for a new birth, a new

life filled with Christ.

5. Be a Place of Liberty from Bondage - Staying with the story of Lazarus, we hear Jesus call Lazarus out from the tomb. And, Lazarus emerges into the light of day. Please notice that Jesus did not go in and lead him out by the hand. He called him out. Lazarus could emerge by himself, and Jesus let him.

Then, Jesus tells people among the crowd of witnesses to unwrap Lazarus, to free him from the bandages that bound him. Jesus did **not** unwrap Lazarus himself. He didn't have to. The people who had seen Lazarus rise from the dead were perfectly capable of unwrapping him, liberating him from the symbols of his death.

1). Bethany is the place where we are set free from bondage. As Christ called Lazarus out from his bondage to death, he calls us out from our bondage to religion, to legalism, to sin, to the stranglehold the world has on us. Christ liberates everyone who turns to him in faith.

2). God will not do for us the things we can do for ourselves!!! Well, sometimes there is grace and he picks up our slack, but we can't base our relationship with him on that kind of help. He calls us to work with him to set ourselves and others free.

6. Be a Place That Recognizes Christ's Supreme Worth - How did this happen in Bethany? In John 12, you have Mary anointing Christ's feet with a precious perfume worth a year's pay for a laborer. She did this at a dinner in Jesus' honor, in front of her family and his disciples.

In Matthew and Mark we read about a feast at the home of Simon the Leper. Clearly he is no longer a leper (Jesus probably healed him) because he has a home in town. But, he is still probably ostracized, stigmatized, feared. **But, not by Jesus!** So, at the feast

there is a healed leper, and Lazarus, a man who not long before had been dead. This is a family dinner, Christ's family. This is what authentic church life looks like. It is like our celebration of Holy Communion, when we can all come forward and participate in the sacrament, symbolically feasting with Christ and his friends. His friends, just as he wants us to be his friends.

One more comment about Mary and her perfume made from pure nard. As I said, it was worth a year's wages for a laborer. To put this in current terms, consider that the average annual income in the US is \$46,000. If that was the value of the perfume Mary anointed Jesus' feet with, what did it represent? Was it her inheritance? Was it her future? Was it all of her security?

If you remember the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations that Pastor Paula led you through, you may remember that it referred to Passionate Worship and Extravagant Generosity among the Five. What Mary did would have to be a combination of those two qualities. Call it Extravagant Worship. What an example for us today. It exemplifies what Paul said to the Philippians: **I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.**" (Philippians 3:8)

Do we ever consider that comparison? Do we believe that Christ is worth more than everything we have? This deserves some prayer time from each of us this week.

7. Be a Place Where Christ is Ministered To - In Mark 11, we have a story about Jesus that is very unnerving on first reading: **On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for**

**figs. He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.”
And his disciples heard this. (Mark 11:12-14)**

The tree should have had figs if it had leaves. The leaves were advertising, shouting out to the world that it had figs. But, that was a lie. It was keeping its figs for itself, hoarding them. It was completely useless for hungry people, like Jesus.

That evening, he returns to Bethany, “House of Figs.” It was the place that could feed him physically, spiritually, emotionally. Bethany was home. We can be home for Jesus, too.

8. Be the Place of Ascension - After Christ is resurrected, after he appears to the two on the Emmaus Road, after he appears to his disciples to prove he was alive and not a ghost, it was time for him to return to Heaven: **Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” (Luke 24:50-52)**

Jesus ascends from Bethany. He leaves his earthly home and goes to his eternal home. Then he returned, to make **us** his earthly home.

Our world, which I called a mess at the beginning of my first sermon in this series, needs a body of Christians in every city, town and village, a community of Christians who embody Bethany, Christ’s true home, and ours as well: a place that esteems Christ above everything else, people who give themselves utterly to Christ and to one another, a body that is more a family than a “bless-me club,” a body that will stand for God’s interests in the world, breathing in the Holy Spirit, enraptured by the living Christ. It should be the goal of St. Matthias, first and foremost, before and above any other goal, to be that body.

And why should we worry about this? Why should we bother? It all comes down, finally, to who Jesus is. Who is he?

Behold him at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-12), turning plain water into the finest wine every produced, sparing the groom great shame at running out of wine, and making him a hero to his guests.

Behold him speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). She is a woman enveloped in shame, exuding humiliation because she is five times divorced, a social outcast. Jesus breaks an ancient custom and speaks to her, shares his truth with her. She is inspired and overcomes her shame to share his truth with her village. They meet Jesus and come to believe he is the Messiah.

Jesus makes another hero.

Behold him as he allows a prostitute to love him as she pours her ointment on his feet, and can't stop kissing his feet (Luke 7:36-49). And, this is not Mary. All this is in a Pharisee's house, at a special dinner he had arranged for his friends to meet Jesus. The Pharisee, speaking for most of us, is horrified, and thinks Jesus wouldn't let the woman do this if he knew what kind of woman she was. Jesus rebukes the judgmental Pharisee, as he rebukes the judgmental Pharisee in each of us. What an amazing man this Jesus is. What a guy! What a Christ!

And, let's not forget that Christ is praying for us. As he was praying for his disciples at the Last Supper, asking for the Father to bless them, he says, **"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word."** (John 17:20)

Consider for a moment how it feels to know that Christ was praying for you 2,000 years ago, and continues to pray for you now. How does that realization make you feel?

When Paul tries to describe Christ to the new Christians in Philippi, he writes in verse, perhaps one of the first Christian

hymns: who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

This is no shrink-wrapped Jesus. This is no mascot to pull out when we need to feel warm and fuzzy. This is no figment of someone's fertile imagination. This Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and the Savior of the World. He was above everything, EVERYTHING, but chose to come to earth, to live, teach and die among human beings, and to rise again, so that he can be in each and every person's heart, if we so choose.

In 1739, Charles Wesley wrote one of the most famous Christmas carols of all time. Here is the third verse:

**Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to *all* he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn king!"**

Can it be any clearer than that? As Christians, we have read or heard the stories of Christmas and Holy Week and Easter. We have read or heard the parables Jesus told. We have read or heard how

much he loves us, what he was willing to give up for us, to go through for us, because of his eternal and infinite love for us.

We must respond. This is so important. If you have been touched or moved by these sermons on *Jesus Manifesto*, or in some other way, I would invite you to offer to Christ everything you are and everything you have. Christ will certainly bless you as you as you commit yourself to being his home, his Bethany. May you feel his love and his presence in a special way, and may that feeling drive you forward in your growth as a disciple of the Living Lord.