

THE CALL OF BETHANY

Part 2: EXPRESSION

Matthew 26:6-13

Bethany Church

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I really want to be sensitive. Because some funny jokes are at the expense of people, and because I really don't want to offend any one, I use an extinct race that lived in the times of the Bible, the Hittites, for my jokes. I figure that if they are not alive, they cannot be offended. You ready for a joke? There was a Hittite couple named Ole and Lena (That doesn't sound like Hittite names to you? How about Lars and Lena?). Lena had a bad day. She made a mistake driving and totaled her 1987 Oldsmobile Cierra. She went to her insurance agent and said, "I went over to Adamson's and want a check to buy one of them new-fangled Plymouth Prowlers. It's costs \$49,667." The insurance agent told Lena, "Your old car isn't worth that much." Lena said, "I know that, but I bought the insurance so I could replace the car if something happened. I want to replace it with a Prowler." The agent told her that insurance doesn't work that way, that they pay only what her old car was worth right before the accident. Lena thought long and hard, and then she said, "Please cancel the insurance on Ole."

It appears that Lena may not estimate Ole's monetary value very high. You can be sure that God does not follow suit. God considered you and me worth the suffering and life of his one and only Son. God believes that we are worth all of that pain. (When I see the carnage on the highway, the loss from disaster, the atrocities of depraved thinking, I remember that God counts us worth the endurance of all that pain. God saw

and suffered the anguish of all of that before we were made.) In other words, our value is inestimable.

That is one reason when we look at the landscape and see a winding stream, a grove of trees or fields of grain, we ought to consider their divine purpose and the blessings they offer humanity. I'm not a believer in chance. Chance did not give us this land. Chance has not provided us with shelter and food. Chance did not name us.

Last week we considered the power and destiny that lie in our names. We considered people like Gideon, Naomi and Peter. We also considered the name God gave this congregation, "Bethany."

The two meanings that linguists propose for Bethany, "house of dates" and "house of unripe figs," offer us both a glimpse of our history and our future. In the home groups that Diane and I have visited, we discovered that Bethany Church has been a house of dates, a place of refreshment and restoration for a number of people. Bethany has carried that significance as people recovered from various wounds in life. We have that calling. Even now, our own wounds can become resources in healing others. We have a calling to restore weary and wounded people. Moreover, as I watch preschoolers pour past my window each day, I'm reminded that we also are a house of unripe figs. This body of believers has become a home for the development of God's unripe figs. We are a place for children. We are a house for children of all ages. We have a calling to help people discover their purpose and realize their potential. God has a destiny for us as a people. God has a plan for us as a team. We are not robots, however. We must choose that destiny. We must accept that call or it won't happen through us.

I believe in destiny. I do not believe in fatalism. In destiny we are players. In fatalism we are pawns. In destiny we make the hard choice and fulfill the call. In fatalism our choices are irrelevant. I'm a fatalist about nothing. Because we are made in the likeness of God, our choices shape the future. Destiny believes that there is a time for our lives and an unfolding plan. Fatalism believes when your number is up it's up. I don't believe that for a second. Our actions, even those that are unintended, play a decisive role.

The 1st Century community of Bethany was pivotal to the future of the world not because of fate, but because of the actions of individuals. Jesus was dining in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper. That was not a particularly flattering name. It's like being called "Joe with AIDS." The difference, however, was that the name celebrated what Christ healed. The name constantly reminded people of the wonders God did through the ministry of Christ. The name was a testimony. The twelfth chapter of John reveals that Lazarus, who had been dead three days and was raised to life, also reclined at the table. Two men, whose lives have been returned to them by Jesus, are eating with Jesus and his disciples, and Lazarus's sister Martha was serving the dinner. When his other sister Mary came in, she brought a jar of expensive perfume. How expensive? It cost about a year's wages or the average annual household income of that day.

I'm getting a little technical, however, I think it would be helpful to get a rough estimate of what that might mean today. In Northwest Rochester the cost of Mary's perfume if it was exactly the average household wage would be \$59,942. In Northeast

Rochester the figure would balloon to 65,894. In Southwest Rochester the perfume would cost \$87,747. In Southeast Rochester it would fall to 50,392.

Now think of it. A woman spends between fifty and ninety thousand dollars on a single pint of perfume. She pours its entire contents on the head and feet of a man and carefully wipes the excess off with her own hair. The disciples are horrified. They see a sin. Jesus sees love. Jesus sees gratitude.

In Luke 7 an immoral woman stands behind Jesus as he eats dinner in the home of a Pharisee. She weeps. Soon Jesus feet are washed with her tears and some perfume. While others believe righteousness is served by shunning her, Jesus sees a wounded daughter in need of healing. He's not worried about proper worship or conduct. He's focused on the restoration of wounded people.

In Luke 24 a group of followers walk out the gates of Jerusalem and go as far as Bethany. There, at that place, Jesus lifts up hands and blesses them. They see Jesus ascend. They, who've been trained to recognize only one God, to believe in only one God, to worship only one God, drop to their knees, fall on their faces and worship Jesus.

They haven't got it worked out intellectually. They haven't carefully worked out a doctrine of the Trinity. They are at Bethany not Athens. They are at Bethany, a place of encounter, not Athens, a place of reason. They are at Bethany where they have encountered something that has brought them to their knees.

Mary with her expensive perfume wasn't thinking how can I best use this perfume to advance the kingdom of God. Mary wasn't thinking in terms of good and evil, right

and wrong. Jesus had punched through her vision that she and we have from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and instead she was focused on the tree of life. She was focused on Jesus who had given her back her brother. Unlike Lena who was concerned about the replacement cost of Ole, Mary was moved by love.

What Mary did may have not been logical, but it was natural. There was a “naturalness” to what she did. It was in her nature, in her heart to honor Jesus this way, given what Jesus had done. This expensive moment spoke volumes about what Jesus meant to her.

There’s a place in this world for communities like Athens where study and logic take center stage. There is a place for churches that operate like Athens and turn out Christian scholars. However, God named us Bethany. Bethany was a place where people got their lives back. It was home to Simon the Leper and Lazarus. Bethany was a community where wounded people were healed and where worship, if not carefully reasoned, was from the heart and gave testimony to the power, presence and work of Jesus.

At Bethany we are called to shed the disciples’ vision of good and evil and join Mary in her focus on the Tree of Life. At Bethany we are to be less concerned with how to worship than with the encounters that cause people to worship. At Bethany we are called to a ministry of healing, to a work that restores wounded people.

Do you have wounds that need healing? You’re in the right place. Have you been wounded at Bethany? Perhaps, you are being weaned from self-reliance so that God

can use you like a Joseph or a Moses? Has God used your wounds to fill you with compassion for others who are wounded? Are you to team with a people called Bethany in bringing Christ's healing to Rochester and the international community we serve?

We are not Bethany by chance. We are not Bethany by fate. We are Bethany by God's Spirit, for destiny.