

**FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 43:16-21**  
**SECOND LESSON: Phillipians 3:4b-14**  
**THE GOSPEL: John 12:1-8**

**The Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**April 6, 2019**

**“Lenten Reflections: Faith Formation”**  
**Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson**  
**American Lutheran Church of Sun City**

On this beautiful Sunday morning, grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This story has been heard before and often this is the time where we prepare by understanding the role that Judas played in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Even in the message itself, it has derogatory comments about Judas. So it is a struggle for pastors to reconcile this, because without Judas, the story of the crucifixion would not have happened or would have at least been different. So, I am not going to worry so much about this story you have heard before. I want to use it as a Lenten theme for you and that God’s love through Jesus Christ seeks to form us spiritually throughout our life. Even at this late moment in the relationship between Judas and Jesus, there was a movement of grace by Christ that may be new to you. It certainly was new to me in my contemplation.

Faith forming life. Having faith in the love of God, having faith that our heavenly home is secure, so that we are able to improve our life, not because it is an improvement to learn God’s love but because God opens us up in ways to love more. The finish line for us is not competition against someone else, it is completing the race that God has given us, which is to love much and to be loved. So, Paul’s imagery here is forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I could use a simple word. That word is “love.” I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly called God in Christ Jesus, this word known as love.

Faith formation is understood as a practice where different styles and experiences of life come upon one. It is amazing that our faith is formed often in times of great difficulty. It does not seem like it is the right thing, but that is the way that sometimes we are broken open for God’s love. Sometimes life seems so chaotic. The theme for chaos in the Old Testament in the Isaiah text was “the sea.” The sea was viewed as tremendously chaotic. In these phrases, the Lord makes a way in the sea. That is our comfort and confidence, this faith forming our life, when we believe the promises of God, that it is not pure chaos but that God’s love rules.

It is difficult to be formed by faith because we have to rely upon stories that we have heard before. The first reading for today speaks of that when the red sea comes over the Egyptian soldiers and it speaks about that they are extinguished, quenched like a wick. So as we recall

that, then there is this directive: Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. It seems like a jarring juxtaposition but it opens us to the life of faith, because it moves then into this statement: “I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth,” God says, “do you not perceive it?” Often we do not, because we have harkened back to the way things were, to the way things used to be.

It is an amazing time to be a Christian. It is ripe with opportunity, or we can lament together. There has been an incredible movement over the past 25 years. A question that Pugh research center asked is, “What is your faith or what group do you identify with? Mainstream, Protestant (like we would be), evangelical, Roman Catholic, or other groups?” You know what now is tied for the leading group? NONE, none of the above. Can you believe it? Just in these last 25 years. So some of us harken back to the good old days. I was born in 1957. Those were good old days, weren’t they? Church was thriving and people expected to be part of that. Then this thing called the 60s hit and then the 70s, the 80s and the 90s. It just keeps going on. So I harken as our faith forms us, the finish line is God’s love. The finish line is the primacy of Jesus Christ into this world. So, as we do not remember former things but are open to the new things for our individual lives and certainly for our church’s life, we cannot resurrect 50 years ago when this church was formed, 44 years ago actually. We are not trying to do that; we are trying to see how God is forming us now. So I just give thanks that we are not the people that hold onto the past, but we give thanks continually about what is God is doing in our lives.

Does anybody here play golf? Let me see a show of hands. I just want to see how many people play golf. Okay, so for you people who did not raise your hand, I just want to say to you that golf is very difficult. If you did not know that, it is very difficult. If you did not know this, your ball, if you hit it, can go to the right or it can go to the left or, as I’ve done before, it just sits there. There are lots of things that can happen. You can hit into sand traps, you can hit into lakes, and then there is a thing called putting, and it is very, very difficult. I have not put a lot of time and effort into golf, but I would like to improve my game. There is a coach named Hank Haney. He talks about that he just wants to help with your biggest miss, and that it would be a lot of work. In trying to think about that as a metaphor for you and I, I think that God has a sense of coming to us and asking us in delightfully difficult questions, or in directives or experiences, to open us up to love.

No more “we” “they,” the normal way of this world, the separation of “we” and “they,” but this unity of God’s love. Let us see if we can open that up in the John text. You know the family in the story. Lazarus had two sisters, Martha who, again here, is serving, the role that she plays so beautifully. Sometimes we encourage her to take a break, but she is serving because of her sense of hospitality. Lazarus who had been raised from the dead and their sister Mary. Think about that experience for her, to see that Jesus had raised her brother. She brought this beautiful, fragrant oil, nard from the Himalayan mountains and worth a year’s labor wage, so it was very, very expensive. Then the extravagance of the act itself. The beautiful sensuality

here of using her hair to wipe Jesus's feet. It is just over the top. So Judas says to this experience, "Why wasn't this sold for money to give to the poor?" Chuck had said a phrase earlier this week when we were preparing for the scriptures. He used the term, "the first example of fake news." Because John is actually casting disparity to this character known as Judas. It was not because he cared about the poor, because he used to steal. In a weird way it is going to come back on John. But Jesus says this, "Leave her alone." That just hit me. That is not said out of great spite; it is said out of love. I would imagine that Judas, in his life, was very apt at criticizing others. I do not know if this phrase was said up into the air generally or just targeted to Judas. But this idea of leaving her alone hit me. This is the way that Christ forms our faith. For you and I, wouldn't that be a better world if we did not criticize others? Wouldn't it be a better world if we did not give either direct or indirect criticism. Leave her alone. We do not know what the purpose is, even though Jesus said it for many people. I teased my wife Debbie saying I could put this into practice if I did not yell at the TV so much. There are different politicians that I get frustrated with and I start yapping at them. Wouldn't it be better if I prayed for the love of God to touch their hearts and to touch my own?

Then this phrase, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." This hit me differently this time while preparing for the sermon. Certainly we have opportunities to minister with the poor. I look forward to these next years ahead, how we become absolutely essential to the life of Sun City and into the West Valley, because there is hidden poverty and some signs of poverty, and we need to understand that they are our neighbors. They are "we." They are members of our congregation. We are together on this. So I look forward to all the different ways, from food to supporting in utilities or pharmacy, or just spreading the good news of comfort and God's love. We have great opportunities. In this case from our text, I think this phrase was directly to Judas, "You always have the poor with you. There is always a sense of poverty with you. You never allow yourself to be extravagant, Judas."

I look at this worship center and I think the word extravagant in its best sense is what I experience. When I first came here and looked, I was just overwhelmed by the opportunity to be with you in this beautiful center. It is just an amazing place. So I want to say that the extravagance of God and our extravagance of response was in the Isaiah text, "to the people whom I formed for myself so they might declare my praise." I am into extravagance if it is for the praising of God. Do you remember when I first started here, I showed this sign "Praise the Lord?" This was almost tossed away. It was one of those items we were trying to get rid of when we were preparing to move. Let's say it together, "Praise the Lord." It says here in Isaiah, when we are extravagant in praising the Lord in all things that we do, in these beautiful things we do and in our support of those who are poor and for those who need love and encouragement, let us be extravagant, as long as it praises the Lord.

So there is this understanding that we are not going to be people with a poverty spirit. It had been stated either we need to refinance our loan in 2022 or pay it off. Guess which one I would

like to do. Let's just pay it off. Let's just get rid of that thing as an impediment to our ministry. We are handling it, but this extravagance is because we want to praise the Lord and use those monies to do something even more beneficial than paying off debt.

So my encouragement to you is this: These questions that are asked by Christ to Judas are the questions of life for you and I, that God continually asks us to open up to love. Leave her alone. Great advice for me. Thank you, God. Do not criticize others. Do not have a poverty spirit. Thank you, God. I can often hunker into that. Sometimes I do not have Christ with me and that is my bad, but I have a Lord and Savior, you have a Lord and Savior, we have a Lord and Savior who is relentless in forming us in faith and love, who will never let us go, who will always be pursuing us. Praise the Lord for this amazing understanding. So, be ready in your own life. Be ready for a new thing in your life. I pray that is an experience for you this Lent. I would ask that it be your best Lent ever because of the understanding of God's deep love for you. May we move into Holy Week next week with this confidence that God is about to do a new thing in our life. We give thanks for this relentless love, this pursuit of us. Praise the Lord. Amen.