

SERMON: What is Essential?

TEXT: Matthew 26:1-13

About two weeks ago, a friend of mine from Springfield posted this on Facebook (edited only for anonymity): *Life with us: Get married - terrorists attack the country; Have a baby - my head explodes; Book first real vacation in four years - Pandemic.*

Now, let me fill in the blanks for you. She and her husband were married on the Saturday following 9/11. A number of people - including most of her family - were not able to attend the wedding as air travel had been shut down. About two weeks after she gave birth to their first (and only) child, she had a massive stroke. This year, they were planning a trip to Florida for Spring Break, and it had to be cancelled because of COVID-19.

She was having a moment of counting her losses, if you will, and reviewing the pattern of bad luck her family has experienced during what should be the high points, the photo-worthy times in their lives. But through it all, she has also discovered what really matters. Though her wedding day was overshadowed and changed by a national tragedy, what matters is that they were still able to get

married - and they are still married to this day. Though she suffered a massive stroke after her baby was born, she recovered, and has been able to enjoy and fully participate in raising a wonderful daughter who is now in high school. And though they had to postpone their vacation this spring, they have enjoyed other vacations, and they plan to reschedule this one for later in the year. She lives her life focused on the positives and she knows what matters most.

We see it on the news all the time. Someone's house was destroyed in a tornado or a fire, and even as they mourn that loss, they give thanks that no one was hurt. Most of their stuff can be replaced; people can't. And yet, so many of us spend our time making money and spending money on stuff. People aren't always our top priority - until something happens.

We are living in one of those tragic times. But this one is not just tragic; it is catastrophic. This pandemic is even worse than 9/11 according to some. It's worse because it's ongoing. It's worse because it is world-wide. And we don't know how bad it will get. We don't know how many people will die. We don't know how long we will have to keep our distance from people and places we love. We don't know how many businesses will fail. We don't know how bad the economy will

get. We don't know if our lives will ever get back to normal, back to the way we lived before.

Catastrophes such as this coronavirus pandemic force us to pause and take stock of our lives. When so much is taken away from us, when so much loss is suffered, we realize what's really important, what really matters. Our perspective on life changes. And we often rearrange our priorities.

In the scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, we learned that Jesus **did know** what was going to happen to him. Here he shares it with his disciples as he had several times before. "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

And though he had reminded them repeatedly of his impending death, they still didn't understand. The next scene finds them in Bethany, at the house of Simon the leper. "A woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, *Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.* But Jesus, aware

of this, said to them, *Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial.*”

This story has troubled and confused people - including pastors and Biblical scholars and theologians - since the moment it happened. The most confusing part of all is that one sentence that Jesus says, “For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

Wait, what? Is this the same Jesus, who has been advocating for the poor at every turn? Is this the same Jesus, who had just finished teaching that to serve *the least of these* - the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner - was to serve him? Is this the same Jesus, who was about to sacrifice himself for the salvation of the whole world, suddenly now doing a complete turn-around, changing the message, and putting himself first?

It is the same Jesus. But what we need to understand is that in that moment, his needs did come first. In that moment, Jesus was ESSENTIAL.

Essential. It's become a buzzword, of sorts, in the last couple of weeks. And we are now defining businesses and workers and human beings as essential or non-essential. Hospitals and medical personnel are, obviously, at the top of the list right now. They are all essential. And some of them - perhaps many of them - are literally working themselves to death right now to save others. Custodians and maintenance personnel everywhere are essential, as they strive to disinfect the places where we work, where we dine, where we shop, and where we go to be entertained. My son and his wife and my daughter are all in the essential category. My son works in a hospital pharmacy. His wife works at an egg farm and is running herself ragged along with her coworkers trying to keep up with the demand and keep the stores well-stocked. And my daughter works in the mental health field. Last, but certainly not least, I have to say that grandparents and the elderly are essential, despite what the lieutenant governor of Texas has suggested.

Jesus allows himself to be anointed by the woman because he is essential. He will be rejected, tried, whipped, beaten, stripped, and crucified within the week. He is running out of time. Just once, before he dies, he needs to come first. *"You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."*

This is the moment when Jesus demonstrates the second half of his greatest commandment: To love your neighbor AS YOURSELF.

Are the poor still important? Always. You will *always* have them with you. Are those who will continue Jesus' ministry called to focus their efforts on the poor and the least of these? Absolutely. This is the primary emphasis of all his teachings.

But at this moment, before he dies, we need to be reminded - the whole world needs to be reminded - that Jesus is essential as the embodiment of God's grace and love for the world.

As he anticipates his own crisis, his own tragedy, his own suffering and death, Jesus takes care of himself. Jesus, who has lived a completely self-LESS life, takes this moment to practice self-care. He allows this unnamed woman to minister to him, and to offer him an extravagant outpouring of love, in gratitude for his extravagant and undying love of all people. Jesus allows her to worship him.

As much as Jesus emphasizes the call for us to be servants, at this moment Jesus reminds us that we are essential. That we matter. That every life matters. And that worship matters. Worship is essential - not only for our own spiritual health, but so that we can be supported and strengthened to serve and to answer God's call.

We will all be touched by this virus in one way or another. We have already suffered loss, and losses will likely increase before this is over. We are being forced to rethink and rearrange our priorities. What matters most right now to you? What doesn't matter as much as you thought? WHAT IS ESSENTIAL?

May we remember that as we care for ourselves, we are also caring for others. May we love one another and our Lord Jesus extravagantly, without counting the cost. And may we take the time and make it a priority to worship our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To the glory of God!

AMEN.