

"HOW DO I LOVE THEE?"

August 6, 1989

TEXT: Matthew 26:10 "But Jesus, aware of this, said, 'Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me.'"

This morning I want to talk to you about love. That may sound simple enough, but it is really not. Probably no other word in the English language is so often used, yet so little understood. Yesterday afternoon, for instance, I was privileged to officiate at a wedding here in this church. And, as you might expect, the word "love" popped up rather frequently. (I counted some thirty times, not including the music.) And, yet, I wonder how many people really understood what was being said.

You see, we use that word in so many different ways that it almost seems to have lost its meaning. We love our sweethearts; we love our parents; we love our children; we love our God. One word, yet four very different kinds of love. And, if we can believe what we hear, there are those who love music; love skiing; love sweaters, and bluejeans, and even certain kinds of food. Imagine how confused a foreigner must be to hear someone say, "I just love baked potatoes." I wonder what Freud would have thought about that? Of course, you and I know that we do not really mean love when we use such expressions. But that is just my point. Apparently the word can mean whatever we want it to mean.

Why, even when we really mean love, we may not understand it. Consider, if you will, the title of this morning's sermon. Those who are familiar with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese, may already have guessed where it came from.

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace."

I have always loved those words, especially the closing lines:

"I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears of all my life! --and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death."

I have always loved them, but they bother me. Bother me because they seem to say that, in love, what really counts is the way the lover feels. And, however poetic that may be, it is just not true. The most important thing in love is not what we feel, but what we do about it. And, if it were not so terribly

unpoetic, what Mrs. Browning might well have said would be something like this:

"How do I love thee. Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
To rise and fix your breakfast
In the middle of the night."

To which her poet husband might have answered, "And I to take the garbage out of sight."

Not very romantic, I know. And certainly not the stuff that sonnets are made of. But it is just the kind of thing that love is made of. And there might not be so many bad marriages, so many unhappy people in the world, if more of us understood that.

That is one reason why I am so fond of the story I read this morning from the 26th chapter of Matthew. It illustrates so eloquently just what I have been saying. Whoever this woman was --John seemed to think it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus-- but whoever she was, she certainly had a great admiration and affection for Jesus. And, yet, if that had been the end of it, neither Jesus nor anyone else would ever have known. Her feelings were important, but more important still was what she did about them. That is the way it is with love. If it does not move us to action, it is not the real thing.

The second thing I like about this story is the way it shows how extravagant real love is. Real love seeks, not only to do something, but to do as much as possible. And that is just what she did. You see, in Jesus' day it was their custom to pour a few drops of fragrant ointment on a guest's head when sitting down to a meal. In those days, before dry cleaning and stick deodorants, that was one way they could make the meal a little more pleasant experience. But she went far beyond custom.

To begin with, she did not use just any old ointment. Mark tells us that it was pure nard, worth more than 300 denarii, nearly a full year's wages for the ordinary person. And, then, she did not just measure out a drop or two. Mark says she broke the flask and poured the whole thing on Jesus' head.

No wonder the disciples were so shocked. No wonder they thought she was foolish. No wonder they began to think of all the things that could have been done with the money. But Jesus saw something which the disciples did not. He saw beyond the deed to the love that prompted it. And he said, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

Does that mean Jesus lacked concern for the poor, or that he meant for people to be spendthrifts and foolhardy? Of course not. But he recognized her love as something just too great to be cautious and customary. So great that she not only had to do

something, but had to do something big. Is it any wonder that he defended her?

William Barclay writes, "Love never calculates; love never thinks how little it can decently give; love's one desire is to give to the uttermost limits; and when it has given all that it has to give, it still thinks the gift too little." And then he adds, "We have not even begun to be Christian if we think of giving to Christ and to His Church in terms of as little as we decently can."

The third thing I like about this story is the way it shows how love's gift must be given while it can or we may never have another chance. This episode took place at the very end of Jesus' life. In just eleven days he would be dead. Now, of course, the woman could not possibly have known that. But the fact remains that this was, indeed, her last chance. It was literally now or never.

How often you and I may find ourselves in that same situation. We are seized with the impulse to do something fine and generous, but we put it off. We will do it tomorrow, we think, when we are not so tired or not so busy. We will do it later when we have more money, or more time, or more energy. Our beautiful impulse dies unborn. And the thing is never done.

I think of the famous English essayist, Thomas Carlyle. He loved his wife, Jane, very much. But he was a cross and irritable fellow, and he made her quite unhappy. Then, unexpectedly, she died. And in the long and sleepless nights which followed, Carlyle finally realized how she must have suffered under his childish irritabilities. Again and again he cried, "If only I could see her just once more to let her know that I always loved her. She never did know it. Never!" There is a time for doing things, a time for saying things, and when that time is past, it is too late.

So how about you? Is there not someone you love for whom now is the time to show it? To show it, not only with words, but with some convincing, uncalculated action? Is there not a husband or a wife, a parent or a child, a neighbor or a friend, for whom you, too, could do some beautiful thing today?

And what about God? Is there not a beautiful thing that you could do for God today? Something costly, not perhaps in terms of money, but in terms of time, or to our pride and self-centeredness. Jesus said, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven.'" Love --if it is really love-- is something we do. Now! Without counting the cost! If we can show that kind of love --to God, or to one of His children-- perhaps we, too, may hear our Master say, "You have done a beautiful thing to me."