

Life Is Short
March 21, 2010
(Lent 5 – Year C)
John 12:1-8

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

*Life is short.
And we do not have much time to
Gladden the hearts of those who travel with us.
So be quick to love,
And make haste to be kind.
And the blessing of God Almighty:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Be among you and remain with you always.
Amen.*

The blessing that I just gave, which has become known here as “The Lenten Blessing,” has touched many of your lives, as the blessing as also touched mine.

Even just last week, someone called in to the church office wanting to receive a copy of this blessing - because she said how meaningful it is to her every time it is said at the end of our worship during the season of Lent.

Every Lent, some of you will comment on that blessing or will tell me how much that blessing has spoken to your heart.

The fact that this blessing has touched you is very touching to me, because this blessing plays a big role in the spiritual history of my family.

Back when I was in seminary, I served at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Woodbridge, Virginia.

The rector at St. Margaret's was a wonderful teacher and mentor and friend to me.

That priest's name was Sara Chandler.

Sara Chandler loved to wear large silver bracelets on her arms, the kind of silver bracelets that you would buy in New Mexico.

And during Lent, when I stood beside Sara at the altar at the end of the worship service, she would lift her arm up quite dramatically to pronounce the blessing.

And as her arm went up in the air, those silver bracelets, clinked and dangled down on her wrists,

And then she said, in a slow and measured voice:

“Life is short.

And we do not have much time to

Gladden the hearts of those who travel with us.

So be quick to love,

And make haste to be kind.”

And every time that Sara said that blessing, it would send chills down my spine.

While I was in my second year of seminary, Susan’s brother, Brian, died in Kentucky at the young age of 47.

Brian died in his sleep and his death was not discovered for several days.

As you can well imagine, Susan and her parents and the whole family was shocked and in deep grief about Brian’s sudden and young death.

Susan’s family asked if I would officiate at the graveside service.

Therefore, the first funeral that I ever officiated at was that of my brother-in-law.

When we were planning the funeral, Susan said,

“I wish you would say the blessing at the grave, the blessing that Sara uses, you know, that one that begins:

Life is short.”

I could not remember the exact words, so I called Sara on my cell phone.

And Sara repeated the words to me over the phone while I wrote them down with a pencil.

So at the grave of my 47 year old brother in-law, I lifted up my hand and said:

“Life is short

And we do not have much time to

Gladden the hearts of those who travel with us.”

One year later, Susan’s father died.

My father-in-law died only 2 weeks shy of his 70th birthday.

So the first person I ever buried was my brother-in-law.

And the second person I ever buried was my father-in-law.

So at his grave, I lifted up my hand and said the very same blessing.

That next Christmas, I had a calligrapher write out that blessing and I had it framed and gave it to Susan for Christmas, where it is displayed in our home.

And when I was ordained, I brought that blessing with me to St. Mary’s in Houston and used it as the Lenten Blessing.

And when I came to St. Alban’s, I brought that blessing with me and have used it during Lent here and at many funerals and gravesides.

Therefore, there are a lot of memories when I raise my arm up in the air to say that blessing.

For I remember very clearly the arm of the Rev. Sara Chandler, with loads of silver bracelets cascading down her thin wrists.

I remember my very first funerals in my very own family.

And I remember burying parishioners in this flock, many of whom were way too young to die.

Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, could also remember a funeral within her very own family.

Mary, the friend of Jesus, knew all too well that life is short.

You see, Mary’s brother, Lazarus, had died at a very young age.

Mary had watched as her brother’s body was placed in the tomb.

Mary took an expensive ointment called nard, and she had rubbed the nard lovingly all over her dead brother’s feet, as was the custom at a burial.

With her hands glistening with the burial ointment, Mary showed her brother, Lazarus, the love and care that she wished that she had shown to him while he was still alive.

Jesus, the friend of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, did not arrive until Lazarus had been dead for four days.

Yet when he did arrive, Jesus called Lazarus out of his tomb and Mary received a rare second chance to show her brother how much she really loved him.

Later, they all have an incredible dinner.

Jesus is there and so is Lazarus, back from the dead.

Martha is serving up the plates.

And Mary runs off to her bedroom to get the jar of nard, the same anointment that she had put on her brother's feet at his burial.

This anointment costs around a year's wages, probably over \$20,000.

Mary cradles Jesus' feet in her hands and she undoes her hair.

Mary takes this nard, and she lovingly rubs the ointment all over Jesus' feet, as was the custom at a burial.

The house is filled with the heady fragrance of perfume.

Yet Judas, the disciple who will betray Jesus, lurks in the corner.

Judas rebukes Mary for wasting such expensive burial ointment on a man who is still alive.

And Mary turns to Judas, her hands glistening with the burial ointment.

And Mary, with loads of silver bracelets cascading down her thin wrists, lifts her arm up in the air and says:

“Judas: Life is short.

And we do not have much time to

Gladden the hearts of those who travel with us.

So be quick to love,

And make haste to be kind.”

Not everyone likes the Lenten blessing that I use.

At my previous church in Houston, a woman came up to me after church one Sunday during Lent and said:

“I don't like it when you stand at the altar and say:

‘Life is short.’

I already know that life is short.

I come to church to hear that life is long.”

Ah, my friends, Judas lurks in every corner, seducing us into thinking that we will live forever.

Judas lurks in the corner, telling us not to waste the expensive burial ointment on the living.

Judas lurks in the corner, telling us that we don't need to go to our children or grandchildren's dance recitals because there will be others down the road.

Judas lurks in the corner, telling us that we don't need to give away that last 20 dollar bill in our wallet to that homeless man on the street corner.

Judas lurks in the corner, telling us that there is plenty of time to make amends with our long-estranged friends and relatives.

Judas lurks in the corner, rebuking us for living as if today will be our last.

But Mary knows,

Mary knows that her brother, Lazarus, and her sister, Martha, will not live forever.

Mary knows to fill the house with fragrant perfume.

Mary knows to pour out lavish, extravagant, burial ointment all over Jesus' feet.

Mary knows that we need to come to church to hear:

Life is short.

And we do not have much time to

Gladden the hearts of those who travel with us.

AMEN.

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