Isaiah 49: 1-6

[Psalm 1](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=77#psalm_reading)9: 1-10

Philippians 2: 5-11

Mark 14: 1-9

A LOVELY THING Sermon for March 25 2018

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

One of the most pleasurable experiences in life is to have one of your own opinions confirmed, especially by someone in an informed position to know.

This happened to me a couple of weeks ago when I was getting my tattoo. It was a fairly lengthy process, so the tattoo artist and I had a chance for a fairly wide-ranging and leisurely conversation.

It turns out that tattoo artists, by the nature of their job, have an opportunity to make many keen observations about human nature and related matters, and this particular fellow had clearly taken full advantage of those opportunities. He had lots of stories to tell about his clientele, and their choice of tattoos.

The one in particular that gave me a great deal of satisfaction was when he told me how occasionally a new parent will come into the shop with a photo of his or her brand new baby, and ask to have the baby's image turned into a tattoo as a permanent memorial to this wonderful event.

The tattoo artist told me that, while he sympathizes with the loving sentiment behind the request, he always puts up a little resistance by pointing out to the proud parent that – and this is where my lifelong opinion was triumphantly confirmed – that most new born babies look pretty much the same. So his suggestion is that they might want to wait a few months until the baby's features become a little more distinctive and you start to be able to tell them apart from every other baby in the world.

I practically crowed with satisfaction when he said that, because it is exactly the same thought that has run through my mind over the years when a newly-minted parent flips out the phone to show me pictures of little three-hour old Sarah or Billy. “Oh what a beautiful baby,” I'm forced by good manners to say aloud. “Really takes after her father, doesn't she?” When what I'm really thinking is: I hope she's got a name tag on her wrist, so she doesn't get mixed up with some other baby.

My position is that although certain descriptions of newborn children are appropriate – like red-faced and wrinkled – others aren't, including cute and distinctive.

Of course I could be wrong. And the reason I admit I could be wrong is because a similar and related opinion of mine about older children is almost certainly wrong. When I say 'older children', I'm talking about that age when children are toddling around with little pot bellies, when they're bumping into things and falling down and laughing about it, when they're making noises that aren't quite words and addressing those noises directly to you as if of course you should be able to understand them. You all know the period I'm talking about.

The problem is – or rather, my problem is – that virtually everyone I know and respect finds little children that age to be adorable, and their behavior to be sweet and charming, filled with angelic innocence. They love to pick them up and cuddle them, make conversation with them, put them back down to watch them toddle around some more, all the time as interested and absorbed as if they were Shakespeare scholars engrossed in a stunning performance of Hamlet. And why is that my problem? Because once again, my own response to children of that age is a very brief acknowledgment of their cuteness, followed by an overwhelming desire to go someplace quiet and read a book.

And why do I call that **my** problem? Because I'm fully aware that the defect here is in me, not in everybody else in the world. I'm convinced that little children of that age really are adorable and charming, and my inability to recognize that and respond to it is a failure on my part. I am truly missing something that's real. I'm not just different from most others in my response, my response is actually wrong: I am missing something, they are not, and my life is the poorer for it. I am missing reality in the exactly the same way a color-blind person is missing reality.

And I think that's an important admission to bear in mind, because it's based on a conviction that the world – the actual world, the world around us, in which we live and breathe and have our being – that the world contains real qualities over and above size and shape and speed and other things we can measure. Or to put this another way, my conviction is that moral and aesthetic qualities are just as real and 'objective' as so-called physical qualities like size and shape.

Now that might sound like I'm saying something quite simple and unimportant, but in fact I think it points to one of the most important things of all. Because, you see, the direction of influential thought of the last few centuries has been to deny that there are such qualities, to treat them as imaginary or romantic illusions, compared to the cold, hard reality with which all sensible people deal.

What those people would say is that children simply are what they are, creatures of a certain size or shape, and that any sort of response to them other than measuring their height and weight and noting the color of their hair, is purely 'subjective', and is a projection of something about us, rather than being true or false to any actual reality in the world.

Or suppose two people go out one clear and moonless night and look at the stars in the night sky. One of them says, “That's majestic!” And the other says, “Majestic? You're just being romantic. What it is and all it really is is a bunch of giant bodies of burning gas.”

Is the night sky actually majestic? Or are we just giving voice to our own internal reaction, sort of like a grunt of pleasure after a good meal?

Without trying to settle that question here today, it's clear that the Bible's position is that those qualities really exist, that they are just as much a part of God's creation as size and shape and velocity. Our Psalm reading this morning gives us just one of countless examples: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.”

But not only the Bible in general, but Jesus Himself teaches us the same thing, as for example in our gospel selection for today. So let's read it together.

[Read Mark 14: 1-9]

In the East of the time, people did not dine at tables, they reclined on low couches. In our story, while Jesus is reclining on such a couch, a woman comes up to him and breaks an alabaster vial filled with a very expensive ointment called nard, and pours the entire contents on Jesus’ head. Some of his disciples there with him are upset by this, because they see it as a waste of money that could have been put to better use. But Jesus waves away their rejection.

In our translation, we read that Jesus said: “Leave her alone...She has done a good work for me.” But the Greek language has two different words that can be translated as 'good,' and the word used here has a much richer meaning. The word is 'kalos', and it carries with it the thought that the action is graceful and charming, even beautiful. Some translations used the word 'lovely' here, and I think that captures best what Jesus is saying about this woman's act. It's a lovely thing she has done for him.

What the disciples see are the cold hard facts of what the woman did: broke a vase, poured ointment, wasted money.

But what Jesus sees in another aspect entirely, what he sees is the loveliness of what the woman has done.

What makes an action lovely? The word itself tells us. It's an act that reflects the nature of love itself. And what is that nature. Well, just look at this woman, and she can teach us.

This woman pouring out her most precious possession teaches us that love always has a feel of extravagance, of the lack of self-calculation. This woman didn't reckon up the cost of what she was about to do and go back-and-forth in her own mind as to whether the benefit justifies the cost. That's what economists do; that's not what lovers do.

In Romeo and Juliet, at one point Juliet says:

 “My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.”

That's a true lover's sentiment; it’s not calculating, it's not carefully measured out; it's innocent, in the way the actions of children are innocent.

And love takes action when action is available. It doesn't wait for a more suitable occasion, or for a better audience. It acts impulsively, under its own coercion, when the opportunity to spend itself appears. This woman recognized the opportunity she had, and she took it. What a loss it would have been if she had hesitated or had second thoughts.

Jesus himself makes reference to this quality of love at the end of the narrative, when he tells his disciples that what this woman did this night at this one opportune moment would enshrine her on the memory of the universe

There is a recklessness in love that refuses to count the cost, a single-mindedness that ignores difficulties, a lack of concern for what others might think, for what others might say, for what others might do.

And I think that for us, what that makes us realize is that one of the great tragedies of life is how often we feel moved to do something fine, and yet for any or all of the reasons I just mentioned, we fail to do it. It may be that we are too shy and feel awkward about it. It may be that second thoughts immediately arise, and we start dwelling on the cost or the possible failure or how others might look at us...and all the while the time keeps flowing under the bridge and the opportunity disappears.

I think even, if we were completely honest with ourselves, we might admit that sometimes, we are glad to see that opportunity disappear, because the one thing love always does, is make us vulnerable to loss, and that is also something many people fear.

So our application is to be aware of this tendency in ourselves. It can assert itself even in the commonest things, the impulse to send a letter or card, the impulse to tell someone how much we appreciate them, the impulse to give someone a special gift or a special word. The tragedy is how often those impulses are neglected or ignored.

The world would be so much lovelier if there were more people like our woman, who acted on her impulse of love because she knew in her heart of hearts that if she did not do it then, she would never do it at all.

And here's how we know her act was what we should all strive for. Look at the last difficult days of our Lord’s life, when the whole world was turning against him, when even his closest friends and companions were falling away, and we find one single act that drew his attention, the actual, real, objective qualities of which he could see when no one else could, because he had the eyes to see them.

And I think that gives us an explanation of what Jesus meant when he used to say, as he often did: “Let those who have eyes, see; those who have ears, hear.” The world is filled with spiritual things, with the things of God, with beauty, and truth, and kindness. These aren’t just ‘subjective’; they are as the stars in the sky, if we only have eyes to see.

What Jesus saw that day, that which nobody else could see, was an act of extravagant, impulsive, loving kindness, and that was the one act during those dark days, that Jesus blessed. How it must have lifted his heart!

And so let this be our prayer as we enter into the upcoming Holy Week, the week that ends next Sunday on the day of resurrection; let it be our prayer that we be strengthened to follow the example of that woman from long, long ago, whose story we still tell whenever we proclaim the good news, that woman who gave of herself, not caring what anybody said or thought, not caring that it was expensive, not calculating anything at all, but simply opening her heart towards her Lord and our own, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.