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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

March 6, 2016

Series: “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First”

Message: “What Will You Leave?”

Scripture: John 12:1-8

The question we’re thinking about today is, “What will you leave?” Or, more specifically, “What will you leave behind?”

When you know someone, especially if you spend a lot of time with them at home or work or in a particular group, you can usually tell where they have been. They leave signs behind. Certain favorite items have been used, dishes have been left near the favorite seats, the same thing they always forget is sitting in the same place they always forget it, or things have been left neater than they were before.

The items that we leave behind, and the way we leave things shows our priorities, our habits, and our passions. They show how we think of ourselves, and how we think of others.

The same thing happens when we interact with others, often without realizing it. Have you noticed that after you spend time with some people you feel better, more focused, more blessed and encouraged. After you spend time with others, you don’t feel better, just neutral, or perhaps worse than you did before. Sometimes they just take a lot of work. Sometimes you don’t know how to read them. Sometimes it’s their strong will or their intensity around certain topics that leaves you feeling tired, run over, like you need a milkshake.

When we talk about what we leave behind from an even longer term perspective, we talk about our legacy. To leave a legacy is often thought of as the opportunity to give a gift to someone after you die. But that gift does not have to be monetary. In fact, often the most treasured gifts that are handed on are the things that you cannot put a price tag on: how to do a certain task, special memories of certain foods and recipes, moments of being loved not just unconditionally, but extra specially, ways of looking at life, loyalty to certain colleges or sports teams, practice of a living faith.

These are the wonderful gifts that get passed on as a legacy. But there are also things that can get passed on as our legacy that are not so good: deep hurts, memories of being embarrassed, harshly punished, negative attitudes, hate and prejudice, ways of thinking that seem Christian, but perhaps aren’t theologically sound or grace filled.

And when we begin to think about legacy in these terms, we realize that we are building our legacy, investing in what we will leave behind today. Each action, each attitude, each choice that we make is part of that legacy that we are passing on to others and particularly the next generation.

If we want to think about the legacy we are passing on to our children or our grandchildren, we might not want to look so closely at our stock portfolio, even though they would appreciate that, but we might be intentional about focusing on the question, “How do my children, or others, feel about themselves as a result of spending time with me?”

Rachael Macy Stafford reminds us that you “don’t have to wait until your dying breath to see that loving actions make a difference.”

She looked at what she was passing on to her children. As she looked at her hands, they were full of work, a lot of stress from too many responsibilities, too much rushing, not much laughing, too much technology and not enough faith. She realized that what our hands are full of is what we pass on to our children and others. These are the things that make the difference in whether we have an open or closed heart and whether we have a living or almost faith.

As she realized this, she made this commitment: “I wanted to leave the earth better than I found it, to live on in habits, words, and memories of those who had loved and learned from me.”

And each conversation, good or bad, each moment shared, good or bad, each attitude or passion or worldview that we engage in will either help or hinder this goal.

Having our hands free, our hearts open, and God first, means that we are intentionally living in a way that creates a positive legacy that begins now and lasts long beyond our earthly days. It is the realization that it begins now.

Shannon Alder puts it this way, “Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others and the stories they share about you.”

Mary shows us how to do this so beautifully in our scripture today.

After I preached on Mary and Martha a few weeks ago, a few of you told me you felt better about Mary but you still liked Martha better. Poor Mary… Now if we get to the end of this week and you tell me that you still like Judas better, we’re really in trouble.

Now for those of you who do like Martha, you will be glad to hear that she is a quick learner. This time she has a gathering to welcome Jesus and the disciples at her home. She uses her gifts and serves and doesn’t get upset at all. How could she? She has received from Jesus the most amazing gift. Her brother Lazarus was dead. But now because of Jesus, he is alive. She has a completely new perspective on life and what really matters.

And Mary too, she had gotten it early on, choosing to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to him above all else. And now, after experiencing this unbelievable moment of receiving extra time with her brother, she realizes who Jesus is and she sees life and death differently now because of him.

And so she has this gift, this pure nard, a perfume that was so expensive that it would cost a manual laborer a year’s worth of wages to buy it. And before this she would have saved it to anoint a loved one after death.

But in these moments as she has been given the life of her brother, as she has Jesus there who is true abundant, eternal life, she sees it all differently and she wants to recognize her love for him, who he is now while he is alive rather than to wait until he is no longer with them.

And so she takes this bottle and pours it on Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair, the two most extravagant things she has. The whole place is silent, mesmerized, many are overcome with the beauty, the love, the sweetness of the moment, the fragrance they will never forget. Lazarus is there weeping at the love of Jesus and his sisters, the gift of life.

Mary gives her all in this moment to Jesus. She doesn’t hold anything back. In this moment she does what he will later teach the disciples to do—kneel and wash each other’s feet. And in this moment, without knowing it, she is anointing him as king, the king who will give his life for his people.

Judas can’t stand it anymore. He doesn’t get it. He doesn’t like it, all this emotional stuff. If he could leave, he would. And so he starts to analyze, to create an argument, a nice logical argument to undermine the beauty, the grace, the love in this moment.

“Do we really need to watch this wasteful show of emotion and hair? This is a disgrace! …a whole year’s worth of wages. You could have at least given it to the poor.”

It makes Martha’s embarrassing moment look minor. What is it about their house, these moments between Mary and Jesus that brings out the worst in people?

Jesus defends her again. “Leave her alone, Judas. She is anointing me now for my burial which will come soon. You will not always have me with you.”

Mary realizes that. She shows us how to love extravagantly, to give our hearts and our possessions fully to Jesus. She shows us how to live the moments that will be a legacy of love, grace, and beauty, full of the presence of the Holy Spirit that are etched on our hearts rather than our tombstones.

Judas, on the other hand, shows us how to leave a legacy of cynicism and criticism and doubt. He did not care about the poor or Jesus, only about himself and being in control, and being comfortable and right. His legacy was one of being almost Christian.

Each moment, each day we have a choice: What kind of legacy will we leave?

I hope we will seek to be like Mary, to leave one on hearts vs. gravestones. One that is Christian rather than almost Christian. We have Mary’s example.

I’ll finish with the way that Stafford puts it: “If you should happen to catch a glimpse of what really matters in life, regard it with care. Decorate it with flowers. Cover it with love. Hold it in the sunshine. Give it a little bit of time and attention. And when the world tries to push you forward, listen to your heart instead. Because if you don’t make time for what really matters, no one is going to do it for you. Taking a few minutes to savor everyday wonders makes the heart fuller, the inner doubts quieter, and the human connections stronger. And that’s when the ordinary becomes extraordinary for yourself and those who share your life.”