

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace from God our Father
And the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

We have two very striking contrasts in our Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus comes to a small dinner thrown by Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Lazarus had recently been raised from the dead, and his presence at the table was surely an occasion for celebration. Time for a party!

Then on the other hand we have the Chief Priests who are threatened by Lazarus. The Chief Priests are as fearful of Lazarus as they are of Jesus, and so they planned to put Lazarus to death as well. Time to plot violence!

Some people are having a party, some are planning murder...

Then we have Mary who is so full of love for Jesus that she spares no expense and anoints Jesus' feet with very expensive perfume. It's an act of extravagant love, a love that doesn't count the cost; it's an act of pure selflessness and joy. This is over the top abundance!

And then on the other hand, we have Judas who is calculating the value of the perfume and trying to find a way to skim some of the money for his own personal gain. Again, we have a dramatic contrast, one born out of love, and one born out of greed; quite different reactions, quite different experiences.

These contrasts seem dramatic, yet in our human condition, at different times in our lives, all of us know what it's like to be pulled in one direction or the other. All of us know what it's like to love; all of us know what it's

like to be afraid, to be greedy, or to be jealous. This is just our human condition.

Author, Thomas Moore in his book, *Care of the Soul*, describes how there is a presence of God within each of us. He uses the language of “soul,” but I think we could also use the baptismal language of “Holy Spirit.” He describes how the soul within each of us longs for beauty, creation, connection, love and mystery.

And whenever we encounter these things, he says that our soul rises up within ourselves and we have an outrageous sense of love, wholeness, and hope. We become so overwhelmed with the experience that all fear and anxiousness is completely gone...

I know from personal experience, and also in listening to many of your stories, that there are times in our lives when we may literally feel the closeness or the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Some of you have told me about these “Mountain-top” experiences.

Quick story... One of my mountain top experiences was the day when Johanna was born. I don't think I had ever seen anything so beautiful; the love I felt for Kris and Jo was indescribable. And the same thing when Jon was born. Those kids are my mountaintop experience, and that experience of love will always stay with me.

I remember holding Jo in my arms for the first time. She represented all my hope and dreams... The possibilities were endless... That tiny little peanut

was perfect in every way... The love I felt for her was transformative. To know that that kind of love existed in the world, moved my soul... Perhaps you know what I'm talking about...

And, we are all human, and eventually we all descend from our mountain top experiences. We all experience that life is life, there is beauty in our world and because of sin-- there is also tremendous brokenness in our world.

And when we encounter that brokenness, our souls seem to languish within ourselves, we are embattled with fear, death, anxiety, sin and violence. And we lash out in hurtful ways. Sometimes we are more like Judas and the Chief Priests, than like Mary or Jesus. Sometimes it feels like the Holy Spirit has deserted us, and we feel empty, forgotten, dried up, or abandoned.

There is tremendous brokenness in our world. Our bodies are broken because we eat too much, or don't get enough exercise. Our bodies are also ravaged with things like cancer, or diabetes, or just the natural infirmities of getting older...

Our families are broken because of unfaithfulness, because of abuse or neglect. We often live lonely lives, ignoring each other whittling away our time watching TV or surfing the net. We want desperately to connect with our families, to have meaningful conversations, yet we push each other away with petty grievances, or busy schedules.

Our world seems broken, rarely does a day go by when we don't hear about shootings, or bombings. Innocent people being brutally murdered and we wonder if that hatred will come to us.

Our politics seem broken, people accusing each other of racism and hatred, completely unaware of their own culpability. Finger pointing, dehumanizing each other, and what used to be normal and decent is now anything goes... Our leaders, people we used to look up to, Politicians or even Athletes, are not any role models I wish for my kids!

This world we live in seems so broken, I sometimes wonder if there's any light of hope at all anywhere; at times it just seems too much to bear! And I wonder if this shared anguish that we all live with in this country is *why* we have so much violence...

It's in these moments of anguish that I remember a remarkable story by Viktor Frankl. He was Jewish and survived as a prisoner of a World War 2 concentration camp. He wrote a wonderfully insightful little book called "Man's Search for Meaning." He describes the horrors of camp life: how little they ate, how little they slept-- so cramped together they couldn't turn over. He describes the concentration camp as a systematic killing machine.

He also how described how some prisoners simply couldn't take it anymore and simply gave up their will to live.

He described the filth and the rags they lived in, and the cruelty of the soldiers. He described unspeakable human atrocities. And yet, even in the midst of all this suffering, despair and inhumanity, he tells a story of hope.

On one gray winter morning, freezing and working bare-handed digging a trench, stripped of his freedom, his family, his possessions, his dignity and barely clinging to life he writes, "I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious 'Yes' in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose."

And at that precise moment, he recalls looking up and witnessing a light on the horizon suddenly go on; the light of a farmhouse, awakening to a new dawn. For him, a sign of God's light shining in the darkness, a small, tiny, tiny sign, but for him a mountain top experience; an experience that nourished his soul.

Like Mary in our gospel lesson, amidst all the rancor and threatening violence, she reached out to Jesus in an act of extravagant love; a love which casts out fear and violence. In our baptism, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, God promises to be with us, to come to us when all hope seems lost and dried up.

The good news this morning is that God is here; even in the brokenness. God is present with us today, here in these communion elements and here in these moments. We are reminded of the mountain top experiences we've had. We've experienced love and we know God loves us, and God is still in charge.

The God whom we proclaim Lord, is the God who created everything there is. Our God is powerful. We don't always understand God's ways, but the God revealed to us by Jesus cares about each tiny bird that falls, and loves us with each and every breath we take.

Through Christ there is a health that is even deeper than death; we have hope that all things will be brought to wholeness, a light shines on our horizon and the darkness cannot overcome it.

One day we will all take the hand of Jesus, and he will restore all things. And there will be a resurrection of the body, a new heaven and a new earth, and as Luther would remind us-- this is indeed most certainly true.

Amen.