

Pay Attention

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany,
the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served,
and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard,
anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.
The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples
(the one who was about to betray him), said,
“Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii
and the money given to the poor?”
(He said this not because he cared about the poor,
but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse
and used to steal what was put into it.)

Jesus said, “Leave her alone.
She bought it so that she might keep it
for the day of my burial.

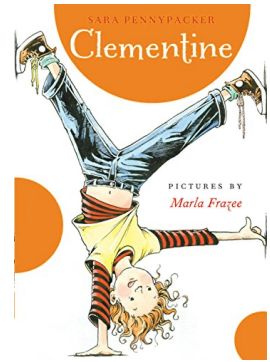
You always have the poor with you,
but you do not always have me.”

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John 12:1-8

March 27, 2022

Rev. Michael Catanzaro



I.

Today we arrive at the 19th edition of our congregation's annual All Church Read; which is really a story all its own. Joining past books, A Gift From The Sea, Holes, Tuck Everlasting, Because of Winn-Dixie, Facing The Lion, A Wrinkle In Time, The Last Lecture, The Little Prince, To Kill A Mocking Bird, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten, Dog Song, The Alchemist, A Monster Calls, The Miraculous Journey Of Edward Tulane, The Hundred Dresses, Winnie The Pooh, and Where The Wild Things Are, is this year's selection, Clementine, written by Sara Pennypacker with pictures by Marla Frazer.

Published in 2006, and set in Boston, this is the first in a series of seven books which follow the eccentric and lovable, yet unintentionally devious, eight-year-old Clementine through her adventures in the third grade.

II.

The character of Clementine, the main protagonist, is largely in keeping with what one might expect if judged by her flaming, red, curly hair. In spite of her good but misunderstood intentions, Clementine frequently finds herself being sent to the principal's office for her lack of cooperation and endearing imperfections. She is a kind, gifted, artistic little girl, as impulsive as she is unpredictable, with multiple personality quirks. Though earnest and upright, she is commonly misunderstood by many authority figures around her; particularly school Principle Rice and the mother of her best friend, Margaret, who is somewhat strict and partially stuck-up.

Of course, this is in no way surprising, given the book begins with Clementine having a hand in helping Margaret chop off all her hair in the school lavatory after Margaret got glue in a few strands while in Art class; a few initial snips led to a few more and then, finally, to an extreme make-over and magic-marker dye job.

III.

While the book garnered several accolades, including the Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor and the Rhode Island Children's Book Award, *Clementine* is, admittedly, not the kind of Newbury Award winner or timeless classic we usually select for the All Church Read. There is no profound moral lesson being taught, no enigma to ponder, no hidden truth exposed, no clever premise to unpack, and no wound from which to heal. Instead, it is simply the story of a little girl making her way through one particular week of her life.

The significance of the book lies not so much in *what* happens, but in *how* it happens as described from the perspective of the main character and first-person narrator. It is an incredible window on the world through the eyes of an 8 year old kid, one which is as humorous as it is insightful and enlightening. Frankly, I think given the past few years, and the events of last week, it is just what the pastor ordered and exactly what we need as a church in this moment.

IV.

The plot is rather straightforward. *Clementine* helps to cut and color Margaret's hair, consequences ensue, *Clementine* cuts and colors her own hair so her friend doesn't stand alone, with a tangle of relationships being tested. A sub-plot develops concerning the pigeon poop in the front of the building where all the characters live and where *Clementine's* father is the Super. Overheard snippets of conversation cause *Clementine's* imagination to run amok, and she begins to fear she is the "hard one" (unlike her brother who is the "easy one") and since "one is all we need" she gets wind of a "surprise" which she assumes to be "Good-bye and good riddance" to her.

The story ends with *Clementine's* parents throwing a surprise party to thank her for helping to solve the pigeon problem (good-bye and good riddance) complete with cake, and a new kitten (only needing one from the pet store) with *Clementine* realizing however hard she can be sometimes, she is so very easy to be loved by all.

V.

Beyond the storyline, I would like to give you a sense of *how* the story is told, and introduce what I believe to be the book's main theme from which today's sermon title is derived, and to which we will then turn our attention.

I have had not so good of a week.

Well, Monday was a pretty good day, if you don't count Hamburger Surprise at lunch and Margaret's mother coming to get her. Or the stuff that happened in the principal's office when I got sent there to explain that Margaret's hair was not my fault and besides she looks okay without it, but I couldn't because Principal Rice was gone, trying to calm down Margaret's mother. Someone should tell you not to answer the phone in the principal's office, if that's a rule.

Okay, fine Monday was not so good of a day.

Then I got busy working on my project so I wouldn't have to hear any "Clementine-pay-attentions!"s. Except I did anyway. Which was unfair because each time, I was the only person in the whole art room who was paying attention.

VI.

"Clementine, you need to pay attention!" the art teacher said one more time. And just like the other times, I was paying attention.

And then Margaret went all historical, and the art teacher went all historical, and nobody could think of anything to do except the regular thing, which is: send me to the principal's office.

If they had a special class for gifted kids in art, I would definitely be in it. But they don't, which is also unfair, only for Math and English. I am not good at English, okay, fine. But this year I am in the gifted class for math. And here is the bad surprise: so far, no gifts.

"Clementine, you need to pay attention," said Principal Rice. See what I mean? Me, paying attention; everybody else, not. I am amazed they let someone with this problem be the boss of a school.

"Hi Mom, everything went great at school, I was really paying attention, and now I'm going to play with Margaret because everything's fine with Margaret, no problem, "bye." Just so she wouldn't worry.

VII.

Miraculously, though not necessarily surprisingly, the repeated admonishment to Clementine, that she should, “Pay Attention,” is an ideal lens through which to view today’s scripture reading from John 12:1-8. Here, in this passage, we find Jesus rebuking Judas Iscariot after he criticized Mary’s decision to use pricey perfume to anoint Jesus rather than to sell it and give the proceeds to feed the poor. Nard, or more properly Spikenard, is an aromatic, amber-colored, essential oil derived from a flowering plant in the honeysuckle family which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India.

Turns out, though, that beyond being the eventual betrayer of Jesus, Judas was also something of a thief. As keeper of the common purse, Jesus knew he was skimming and that Judas’ real concern was for his own benefit and not that of the poor and hungry.

VIII.

This week I had cause to consider the great many things in which we, as a congregation, should take pride. We are a *nice* bunch, to be sure, but more importantly, we are also *kind*; kind to the stranger, kind to each other, kind to ourselves, and we try so very hard to have kindness be our gift to the world. Correlating to this, there is no dissonance between our faith and our lives; we walk the talk. Moreover, we are a tough talking bunch. We talk about the hard issues and ask the hard questions, both of ourselves and of our God. When it does come time to get moving, though, we endeavor to walk softly in keeping with the big stick of compassion that we carry. Perhaps most rare with respect to our ecclesiastical peers, we have an awful lot of fun along the way; joy and laughter is the coin of our realm. Even with all this, however, I think the thing about which we should be most proud, is the attention we pay our kids.

IX.

Here on the Park, we want kids to know that they are not only *seen*, but *heard* as well. From the glider-rockers to the playground equipment to the staffed nursery and paid Church School Director, activity packs for time in the sanctuary, kid’s sermon, caramel corn at Christmas, Food for Fellowship meals, and kid-friendly treats at coffee hour, we send the strong and unmistakable signal that children are welcome here.

Beyond the “stuff” that bids them “Come!” there is a palpable spirit which says to them “Stay!” We want our kids to know that this is *their* home, and what makes it so is the heart of a congregation which rejoices at the mewling, fussing and fidgeting of babies in worship; recognizing there is no more joyful noise that can be made unto the Lord than this. A congregational heart which only smiles to see kids exploring, using, and running in, outside and all around the church.

X.

With a church full of folks who love to read, particularly the women of our congregation, it was only natural that 19 years ago we instituted the “All Church Read.” A few years in, however, we shifted our focus to young readers in specific; paying attention to their unique needs and developmental stages. Eventually, we realized the practical and symbolic value of having our church gift kids with a book each year; this year 28 families received their own copy of Clementine.

Presbyterianism, as a religious tradition, has always understood and emphasized the importance of a “Reasoned Faith” and a “Learned Ministry” with respect to the study of scripture, theological inquiry, sound doctrine, orderly church governance, and the broader workings of a democratic nation. Cultivating literacy and a love of learning in our children is the single most important tool we can give to help these kids explore, understand and pay attention to the world around them.

XI.

Though I believe our kids know that we pay attention to them, of late I’ve been wondering how well *we* are doing in paying attention to that which *they* pay attention, and to those things and people who are seeking *their* attention. In our today’s book, Clementine just can’t figure out why everyone is always telling her to “Pay Attention!” The truth is, she *is* paying attention to *everything* going on around her; though, admittedly, a little less so when it comes matters of greatest concern to the adults in her life.

Adults who, like us, are taken up by the day to day grist and grind of earning a living, making a home, raising and teaching kids, being involved in our community, and just keeping pace with an ever-changing world. However, as Jesus’ words from today’s passage serve to remind us, like the poor these

things we will always have with us; there is more happening in any given moment to which we need to pay heed beyond the common and the purse.

XII.

Like Clementine in the book, Mary in the scripture was paying attention to things which no one else seemed to notice, or cared to notice. Sitting down to dinner with Jesus and Lazarus (recently raised from the dead) Mary knew there was something happening here, what it is she probably wasn't exactly clear. Though her actions undoubtedly didn't make much sense to those around her, much like Clementine they made sense to her and that is all that mattered; they certainly made sense and mattered to Jesus.

In an expression of thanksgiving for raising her brother from the dead, and in an act which foreshadowed Jesus' own death at week's end, Mary tenderly and lovingly anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Mary paid attention to Jesus while he still was with them.

XIII.

Today's scripture reading is a reminder to us, to pay attention to the *important* things, and to do so while we still have the opportunity. Let us pay attention to the kids of our church while they are still kids; because they are growing up quickly. Let us pay attention to what *they* pay attention to: the dreams, the hopes, the wild imaginings, and the connecting of disparate dots; all the things we adults tend to miss because we are too busy, too tired, or otherwise occupied by those things we inescapably always have with us. And, let us pay attention to those things and people seeking the attention of our children: some which are benign but distracting; some which are unwise and make an already steep hill even more difficult to climb; and, others which are outright malicious and malevolent, posing grievous risk and grave danger to those whom we love most tenderly.

Let us pay attention to our kids in the same way that Mary paid attention to Jesus; who so easily and tenderly loves us all. Amen.