

**“Anointing a Living Christ”**  
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

A couple of years ago, I guess, I was visiting with a woman in her 20s. She was working for a nonprofit here in town and she was talking about her church, or her “house” church. She was just thrilled by it, and she said, “It’s such a wonderful thing. We invited – my husband and I – invited our friends and we just started ‘church’ in our house.”

She talked about it in such glowing ways. She said, “We all get along. We don’t fight like they do in churches. We do most of the things that other churches do, but when we take up our offering all of it goes to mission.” So, she was implying that churches are wasteful of their money.

I sat and I listened, and I was trying to be very calm, because I have to be careful – because I’m part of the ministers’ union. [Laughter.] I got to thinking about what that means, and it just never went away – trying to think about: “OK. Is that the better way?” Because she even went so far as to say, “You know, that’s how the first churches were. They were in houses. They weren’t in big churches.” And I thought, “Yeah, and you are asking me for money right now.” But that was something else for another time.

The reason that, all of a sudden, after two years, this comes up in my mind, is because I read this passage and it clicked for me: Here is Jesus walking into the house where he knew he would feel comfortable, because he had already raised Lazarus from the dead; he knew Mary and Martha well; he called Lazarus a good friend – and this is after Lazarus had come back to life. Lazarus owed him his life. Mary and Martha loved him for bringing their brother back. He couldn’t have been in a warmer, more-friendly, inviting environment.

In come the Apostles with him – including Judas. He sits down, and Mary’s overflowing love is literally poured out in front of him, in the form of a pound of nard. This perfume – this fragrance – was a year’s salary: 300 denarii was the equivalent of a year’s salary. That would be like pouring \$60,000 out on his feet, today. (I think I would gasp a little bit. I would be a whole lot like Judas, going, “You just did what?!?”)

Think about where that \$60,000 could go. And, yet, we know, because I just read it to you, what Jesus said – how he responded to Judas and to Mary. He didn’t react by talking about wastefulness. He didn’t talk about the poor. I hate that line – that last sentence, that last verse – in John 12:8 that talks about how the poor will be with us always. I have had more church people, over time, say, “We don’t need a mission budget, because the poor will be with us always.” That is a bunch of malarkey. That wasn’t what Jesus meant when he said that line.

He talked about the role of “honoring” while you have God in your midst and I’m floored – and it took me back to this woman talking about her church in her house. It is not unlike a lot of “cell groups.” In my last church, we had a mega-church – a family whose son and daughter were mega-church people out in Japan, oddly enough. But, they started their mega-church by starting out with “cell groups,” by having little churches in their homes, and it never quite worked. Part of it is because Japan was a very hard missionary field. It was one of the hardest to actually take hold. But they changed their mind in the last 15 years that cell groups and home churches didn’t quite work. Well, why? Why does church

still work in its present form, and house churches – that were supposedly from the beginning – did not catch hold?

I think there are a number of reasons and I would like to walk through those with you, for a moment:

One is, that if you are sitting in your living room, it is a little different than sitting in this Sanctuary. There is an awe here. What is that line that the choir just sang? “You feel the touch of angel’s wings.” You feel God’s presence in a sacred place that is meant for this purpose. That is why we have a Sanctuary and why we call it a “Sanctuary.” It is a “sacred” Sanctuary, where we find peace and hope, amidst the dysfunction and the sadness of this world. It is not bad to do that and yet it is expensive.

This Sanctuary costs quite a bit; this organ costs quite a bit; but I look at that like Mary pouring the perfume – the nard – on Jesus feet. It provides the way for us to honor God in a way that is unique and special.

You walk into this place and you recognize the fact that we honor God here – and that’s been hard in contemporary society. The culture wars in churches, between older people who like a Sanctuary like this and so many younger people – and now I can’t even say younger people, because frankly the people who like the contemporary mega-churches are mainly baby boomers, and you all are getting kind of old now. [Laughter.]

One of the reasons why older people like this kind [of church building], as opposed to the mega-church, or God-in-a-box kind of thing with a pole barn, is not because we like to show off our beautiful building – and we’ve got turrets and the church down the street doesn’t. It’s because we feel the honor and the glory that we can give God in this place. We want it to be something different from every other aspect of our world.

And there is also a smaller side-argument about church buildings – church clothing. You look at older people and younger people, and they point at each other, and the younger ones say, “Look at these older people, dressed up in their ties and their fanciest dresses. What do you think? They are just showing off, and they make people who don’t have a lot of money feel guilty and bad.” And, I say, “Look at the African-American church. You go there, you are dressed to the nines, and it’s not because they are showing off.” They’re very much like a lot of older people are here today. You do it, not to show off; you do it because you offer God your very best.

When I was growing up, I only had like one sport coat and one tie, but, by golly, I wore that every week, because you offer God your best. That is why you dress up, according to older people. Now younger people say, “No. No, that’s just posing. You can go anyway you want, and that is true; God is not going to be upset with you if you wear nice clothes. That isn’t what it is about – and that is where the generation gap happens. It’s the same thing in churches. You don’t need this fancy façade. This building, I think, is valued at \$12 million dollars. Now, I would like to have an offer for that \$12 million. I don’t think we would get it, but that is what the insurance is valued at – about \$12 million.

However, there is no place like church. You can go to a pole barn and you can feel like you are in a theater, but you walk out and it doesn’t have the same awe and reverence. It’s like pouring it on the feet. That is why we offer God our very best. That is why we take care of

this facility. We could give a little bit more to the poor every time; we do that and we share it. We offer it with love and care; so there is one place in our world that we can go, where we feel the awe and reverence amidst a world that is stripping away all of the awe and reverence in this world. There is very little of that left – and I hope that there will always be that in a place like this, in a congregational setting – where we can feel something unique and how God is at work.

But I want to move beyond just the building. I feel like we have to define our reason for existing – because we do not only have women, like the person in the house church, who I have a great deal of respect for – because she is worshiping and she believes why she believes what she believes; but we also have to put on the argument for why we exist with the agnostics and atheists, with people who are fed up with the church, and I understand it.

Today I want to address it mainly with the woman in the house church. There is more than just offering your tithe that makes church relevant. Let's start with the early Church. Yes, it is true, they started out in house churches. but the minute they could get out of a house church, they built a church. They stayed in the house church because they were being persecuted. They were staying in the house church because some were even martyred. They were not respected enough. The society would not allow them – because they were not polytheistic enough – to have those facilities. When they could get them, they did.

Secondly, as they moved and formed, they had more political clout to show the world that they were acceptable – that they could be the people of God. Likewise, in a house church there is not the opportunity to provide the same way that there is when you are in a larger group. If you are in a house church, ordinarily you invite people who are like you, you invite your friends, and that's wonderful; but your friends probably look like you, your friends probably believe pretty much the same thing you do.

Who is challenging you in a house church? Who is forcing you to look beyond yourself and ask questions that are uncomfortable, when you all agree?

We don't all agree here – and in most churches they don't either. We have a little diversity of backgrounds, of racial diversity but I'm not talking about that right now. I want to go deeper than that. I'm looking at the difference in ideology, the difference in theology, and understanding of look, and background, and history.

If you are in a house church, you tend to all grow up together, get old together; but here, we honor the difference in generations – we learn from each other. If we are good at listening, we can even pick up the people we don't agree with, and ask why, and not just write them off, because we love them and they are part of our church family.

You can turn away from anybody, but you've got to keep your family with you – and that is what happens in the closeness of a church family. You don't get that in a house church.

Also, if you have ever raised adolescents, sometimes they don't listen to their parents. But, in a church, you have a bunch of parents – you have the youth director, you have the other parents in the group. They (adolescents) may not listen to you, but somebody else is smart. They may not listen to anyone over the age of 30, like they used to say in the '60s, but they will listen to the 20-something-year-olds who are there, backing you up, because they are hip and cool, when you, as parents, aren't anymore – and they are still helping to raise your children.

We had one daughter, but we had a whole lot of parents who raised her. (Some good; some not so good.) Oh my, she had more bosses than you can imagine, as a minister's kid. [Laughter.] But now she is grateful for the love that was shown.

We talked about it lately, the other day. We had a video, and we hadn't shown it to her in years, because we didn't want it to break. She had never seen it until she was in her early 20s. It's of her baptism. And, she looked at all of these people who were all crying and laughing and begging to hold her when she was baptized. She started to cry, because she didn't know about all of these people who loved her so much, and she didn't realize all of the love that she had had earlier in her life.

You can't get that enough in a house church, and you certainly can't get it at a soccer game or a little league game. This place is different and it is sacred. The Holy Spirit moves in this place in a way that is unique and powerful, and profound.

And, part of it isn't just offering everything to the poor, because any non-for-profit can do that. We do that, but we do even more with it.

And, we are not just about this Sanctuary – this \$12 million building that we have to pay all of this insurance on.

One of the reasons I wanted to come here was because you did more than just have a Sanctuary. Your Sanctuary – the whole building – provides care for homeless people every day of the week. This place – this Sanctuary – I would call the whole building the Sanctuary because homeless feel safe here. It also provides 90 children and their families daily care and preschool, which is not just something we do; it is a mission to reach out and care for families in this community, and it is a “sanctuary” for those children and their parents in this place.

This place offers and is willing to tear up part of its parking lot, so that 20 immigrant families can find a way to learn a way to use their crops and learn how to sell them; how to develop life skills so that they can become productive parts of our society – all because of this place.

You can't do that in a house church.

This is so special – and I share this on this Foundation Sunday – where they [the Westminster Foundation] are helping to make sure that this isn't just for right now and generational, but provides care for us for generations to come. So that we don't end up like churches down the street, that are no longer existing. So that we can continue to provide a Sanctuary, not only for our church members, but for the homeless, for the immigrant, for those with children, for all of us, that is safe and where the Spirit moves.

I thank you all, that you are part of this church family; that we can rely on each other, that we can pray together, that we can suffer and laugh together, and the perfume that is falling on our feet gives glory to God, in the same way that in this Sanctuary and the entire building, so many receive the blessings of God.

Amen.