My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten repentant Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Last week we read the story of the prodigal son. It’s a well-known story that we not only know by heart, but we also know its interpretations. That is, until we begin to question the elements of the story to think about them differently and come to a different interpretation.

How did we feel about that? When someone comes along and gives me a different feeling about something I’ve come to know and love, and gazed my eyes on and wrapped my mind around, it puts me a bit on edge. Why do I need to know something different? Can’t I just un-hear what just happened, and go back to the old way of doing things, happy in my gazing on the un-moving detail of what I love?

In my younger years, back in the last century, I was an insurance adjuster for workers’ compensation cases. Now, in order to do that job, I had to be able to interpret doctor’s notes, reports of operations, and know a thing or two about medicine. And one of the terms I came into contact with was “sclerosis”. Have we heard of that word? (take all answers). Sure. Athero-sclerosis. Multiple sclerosis. Sclerosis is defined as, in the most general sense, a pathological (meaning a disease process) hardening of tissue (especially from overgrowth of fibrous tissue). Now, if you’re thinking that doesn’t sound good, you’d be right. Sclerosis can be mild, moderate, or severe. But it’s very rarely able to be reversed.

Sclerosis has also entered our common everyday language away from its medical roots. From that medical origin, today it more commonly implies an inability to adapt or compromise, like in politics. Folks will stand by their positions, believing what they believe, and nothing that can be said will change their minds.

How about how that applies to religion? Is our faith one that is able to have difficult conversations while still holding true to the spiritual truths of our Bible and our God? Some religious folks will have none of it. Words mean what they meant allllll those many years ago when they were written and it’s still true today. Others will say that it’s the spirit of the text that’s most important rather than the actual words. For my two cents, the intersection of what we remember and love, versus what our Biblical text says, versus what we as a people of God hear as God still speaking to us in our own time and context, is where we need to concentrate our efforts.

But let’s be clear—we absolutely have the flexibility in our faith tradition, the United Church of Christ, to look at our scripture through many lenses, many perspectives, and it’s why last week we discussed moving our point of view in order to gain new insights from scripture. To see the world more fully, we have to get out of the house and see its glory, rather than glance at a limited view from any one of the windows of the house in which we live. We did that last week, we’re doing it again this week, and we’ll do it again in future weeks. Okay?

Can I get an Amen to that? (wait for response) Okay.

So let’s imagine that Mary and Martha are at home in Bethany hosting a meal a few days before Passover, and Jesus is the honored guest. Jesus has just raised their brother Lazarus from the dead, and that has drawn all kinds of negative attention from the authorities, and everyone knows it.

As the evening begins, Mary brings a pound of expensive perfume and anoints her Teacher’s feet, washing them as she would a guest but with burial balm for a dead person. Jesus accepts Mary’s anointing, interpreting it as the acknowledgement that his life is in grave peril, and knowing that there’s not much time left together. And so Jesus responds, taking on the servant role and washing the feet of the guests. He talks about and predicts his betrayal, to the consternation of Judas. He preaches to them one last time, as Martha goes between the table and the kitchen cleaning up. Mary is sitting at Jesus feet.

That’s a very different way of seeing the beginning of the Passion narrative isn’t it? But it connects the various scenes of the Gospels into a more coherent whole, first of all locating the raising of Lazarus right outside of Jerusalem, but also it makes sense that the good friends would then spend time together like they used to before Jesus got all preachy and teachy in the countryside.

But that would also suppose that we re-arrange the sequence of scenes that we know and love so well. It makes more sense as a story, but what does that mean for our faith?

We should realize that even Jesus made errors when it came to geography, history, and people. So why do we suddenly think that, upon trying to recall all that Jesus said and taught, that the Gospel writers were infallible?

I don’t think we’re being unfaithful to the scripture here. We still say that Martha was busy serving, Mary was gently sitting and listening to the teacher, Judas was still pre-occupied with lies and betrayal. Jesus can both at once praise Mary and also have some idea of his death and burial. What if we took these disconnected scenes and connected them so that they would be better understood? What does that say for each of us, and all of us, if we re-arrange the Bible to better understand it?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

When we weave these stories together thematically, re-reading John 12-13 can mean that women were not only important to Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, but now knowing that he would be killed, maybe they also tagged along and were with him his final few days, since they were also at the foot of the Cross. What would it mean to our faith if the women important to Jesus did not get excluded from the Gospel, but were included as part of the group that had the last meal with him, helping to prepare the food, sure, but also listening, watching, and crying, knowing he would be dead within 24 hours?

The question then becomes how were they taken out of the Gospel narratives so that only the men remained? Was this something done by the early church, to disconnect these scenes so that the stories not only could no longer hang together, but seem disconnected by time and place so that the apostles were the men?

How different our faith would be now if it were so back then, that women had a place at the Table. So is God still speaking today? Where are the women in our Easter Palm and Passion narratives? I think we’re being faithful when we think about how life stories actually unfold, and maybe in doing so, we might just change some minds and some lives in the process. Or is sclerosis the more faithful path? Let’s ask God together this week.

Thanks be to God, Amen.