

Lent 5: Brazen Acts of Beauty

So far in Lent, we have been exploring the book of Luke, but for today's gospel reading we jump to the book of John. Chapter 12 brings us to the end of the first part of the gospel, which describes Jesus' time in the world during when he performs signs to disclose the true nature of his identity to those who believe. (The second part of John's gospel will include Jesus' farewell meal with the disciples where he prepares them for his departure, followed by the passion and resurrection narrative.)

The author of John's gospel wrote with the intention of leading readers to belief in Jesus as Christ and Son of God. John frequently uses the contrast of opposites in a highly literary style, he loves symbols and signs, appealing to the imagination and empathy of his audience. Today's story is no exception... it is filled with two contradictory characters, rich imagery, intimacy, and revelation.

We have not done this in a while, but now that we have some folks here in person, I am so curious what part of today's reading sparks something inside of you. Listen to it again, what words or phrases catch your attention.

"Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them^[a] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii^[b] and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (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.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it^[c] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

(John 12:1-8).

So, what words resonated with you? (Do not be shy...)

This story is a pivotal moment for Jesus. We are on the verge of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem; Bethany is just outside the city, on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives. Next week, the jubilant "hosannas" of Palm Sunday will ring out.

At the heart of our reading is an act of anointing, an expression of the most extraordinary generosity. Mary's act of generosity is in the context of hospitality and a shared meal. Martha and Mary have invited Jesus and his disciples for a meal. This family had a close personal relationship with Jesus. Lazarus, their brother, is present as a focus for gratitude to Jesus who brought Lazarus back to life. Martha serves the meal she has prepared, her particular act of gratitude. But it is Mary's extravagance in using such costly perfume to anoint Jesus's feet that holds our attention ... and so, offends Judas, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' The perfume would have cost almost a year's salary for a manual worker!

The most obvious contrast in this story is between Mary and Judas, it raises the question of what true discipleship and love look like. Mary does not say anything in this passage, but her actions speak for themselves.

Mary is loved by Jesus and believes in him. She has learned at his feet. She has seen him raise her brother from the dead. Her outpouring of this elaborate gift may be an act of thanksgiving for the gift of life, but John's language indicates that it is much more than that as well. The reader is never given any insight into Mary's internal thoughts, only what John suggests about their meaning. For John, Mary's actions anticipate later themes in Jesus' teaching and his passion.

Anointing with oil or perfume had many purposes in antiquity:

- consecration of kings and priests (see Exodus 40:15; 1 Samuel 16:12).
- healing of the sick (e.g., Mark 6:13; James 5:14)
- as well, the dead were anointed for burial (e.g., Mark 16:1).

Mary's anointing (Luke 12:3) is a prophetic act - both a sign of Jesus' kingship and its formal announcement.

Mary embodies both open-handedness and discerning wisdom, lavishing Jesus with precious perfume, effectively anointing his body, as Jesus puts it, "for the day of my burial" (John 12:7). She sees what the disciples either miss or refuse to see: that Jesus, even as he prepares for his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, is also preparing for his death.

Martha's actions also embody Jesus' teachings. Martha, Mary's sister, is mentioned briefly: "They gave a dinner for him. Martha served..." (12:2). We often pit Mary and Martha against one another - one faithful and generous, the other distracted by practicalities. (It drives me crazy how we do this to female characters). I even remember being at a bible study once where we were asked "are you a Mary or a Martha?"

Yet, commentator Susan Hylen (Working Preacher) says it is more useful to look within John's Gospel for the meaning of Martha's actions. Like Mary, Martha's actions take on new meaning when reflected in Jesus' teachings. Later in the chapter, Jesus points to service (the Greek word in 12:2, *diakoneo*): "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." (John 12:26). Martha is shown to be doing what Jesus expects disciples to do -serve.

So, the women in this passage are living out the discipleship virtues of generosity and service. In contrast, Judas embodies a tight-fisted, stingy stance. Not only does he fail to recognize Mary's wisdom, he accuses her of immoral excess: *You should have used that money to help the poor, as Moses commands!*

There is conflict in this story. Mary's costly generosity is targeted as being a waste. You have to wonder, does Judas have a point? Shouldn't we put the needs of the poor first?

Jesus' response tells us a lot: *Leave her alone! She sees our situation better than you do: I am about to leave you; my death draws near. Will you not honor my body here in the shadow of death, as Mary has done? Even worse, will you dishonor her for doing so? And as for helping the*

poor, as Moses has indeed said, you can and should continually be generous — so why don't you go ahead and do that yourself, Judas, rather than judging and demeaning Mary? You hypocrite: you make a show of being "open-handed," but in truth your fist is closed, the most tightly closed of all... (John 12:4-8).

Many commentaries believe that Jesus' rebuke of Judas alludes to teachings in Deuteronomy (Deut. 15:11). Jesus is not only talking to Judas, but to all of us who wonder if Mary's apparent recklessness sets a dangerous precedent. When he says, "You always have the poor with you," he does not diminish the seriousness of poverty. We cannot separate Jesus from the poor. Jesus brought good news in tangible ways to the oppressed and vulnerable. In his particular and short-lived mission, he recognized and responded to the tangible needs around. And he took it further than charity — Jesus' actions and words consistently challenged the oppressive political system of his day. Although the Empire promised peace and prosperity, it did so through systems that polarized the distribution of wealth, padding the pockets of the elite and leaving the majority impoverished. (Sound familiar?).

Deuteronomy 15 talks about the Sabbath year, and the year of Jubilee, in which debts were forgiven and release of the enslaved. If we take what we know of Jesus' mission to overturn oppressive systems and viewed in the context of the practice of Jubilee, I wonder how Jesus' response to Judas might be a challenge to us to live in the tension between the hope of an ideal world where no one suffers from poverty (God's Kingdom) and the reality that poverty is part and parcel with the way our world works today?

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas (Feasting on the Word) says, "The poor that we always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given." We are called to live out a continually open-handed way of life. The true church (if we are really the beloved community) always has the poor in its midst, until the day comes when God's kingdom is fully realized.

Maybe I should not admit this, but I really like the Gospel stories like this one, in which the women following Jesus prove to be more discerning and devout than the male disciples. Mary *perceptively* and *kindly* anoints Jesus for burial, and Judas, the one whose betrayal will lead to Jesus' death in the first place, *ignorantly* and *unkindly* attempts to put her to shame. Accordingly, Jesus exalts Mary as an exemplar. She acts with more insight and open-handed grace than anyone else in the story. She understands the stakes. She sees Jesus is on the verge of a great trial and a horrific, degrading death — and so she honors him ahead of time, offering him solace and encouragement with almost unbearable tenderness. And at the same time, Jesus puts Judas in his place by exposing his hypocrisy. Having an "open hand to the poor" should be a continual stance, Jesus contends, echoing Moses, not an occasional cudgel for judging others, much less a cover for tight-fisted greed. Yes, being generous to neighbors and moving toward a society in which there is "no one in need" should be our overarching goals — but along the way, there are milestones when special acts of generosity, moments of extravagance-in-love, are beautiful and fitting. Burying the dead is one of those moments, and Jesus, Mary perceives, is on the precipice of death. This is no ordinary dinner gathering. This is farewell.

In his rebuke of Judas, then, so far from condoning unkindness toward neighbors in need, Jesus reaffirms the opposite by invoking Deuteronomy 15: both the neighborly open-handedness God commands and the poverty-free society toward which God calls us, the beloved community

where there is “no one in need” (Deut. 15:4; compare Acts 4:32-35). And that society, please note, will come into being not only through neighborly generosity, but also through social structures at least loosely akin to the sabbatical year. We may indeed “open our hands” to each other personally, and at the same time “open our hands” communally by building and protecting social systems that help counter the root causes of poverty in the first place. The good news of the Gospel this week is that God calls us toward this personal and communal vision of a generous, wisely structured world — and at the same time blesses each of us, women, and men alike, with the wisdom and discernment to follow Mary’s example, opening our hands in ways that honor one another in love and grace. We stand on the verge of Holy Week. The house is filled with the fragrance of perfume. The hosannas will come, the lamentations will follow, and the promise of Easter morning — that radiant new world, dawning even now, where crying and pain and poverty will be no more — beckons from the other side of the tomb.

Sources:

www.sanctifiedart.org
<https://www.saltproject.org>
www.workingpreacher.org
<https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/>
Feasting on the Word commentary

Kindness

*Mary took a pound of costly perfume
made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet,
and wiped them with her hair. —John 12.3*

The disciples don’t understand,
too sure of themselves to imagine the tomb,
to feel the sting, the ache.

Mary does.

Feeling the dullness of his friends
and the harshness of the crowd,
the stone of loneliness,
heart breaking for the Beloved,
for the utter loss they begin to share already,
the gutting of the tomb
already being dug in her heart,
she performs a miracle:
in the shadow of the cross
an act of thoughtful kindness.

Jesus, may I be your Mary.
Let this be the whole of my religion:
to feel the ache of those who suffer
and to offer kindness against cruelty.
Let this be my worship:
simply to be kind.

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