

LENT – A JOURNEY TO EASTER
5. THE WOMAN WHO ANOINTS JESUS

(03/29/2020)

Scripture Lesson: John 12:1-6

(Parallel accounts recorded in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; and Luke 7:36-50)

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.” (John 12:3)

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. The liturgical season of Lent is forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. It is a time that we set aside to prepare for the celebration and hopefully also the experience of Easter.

This is the third Sunday that we have not met as the gathered church for worship because we are sheltering-in-place; we are practicing social distancing; we are cooperating with Governor Baker’s efforts to keep the COVID-19 virus from spreading throughout our state. We miss the opportunity to be together in worship and in fellowship, but our concern for those we love, especially those of our brothers and sisters who are most vulnerable, leads us to make whatever sacrifices we need to make.

I don’t want to say much about what we are going through as a nation and a world; we are inundated with facts, statistics, guidelines, and updates all day long. I would point out the obvious, however, that it is strange having to regard everyone we meet, everyone we know, even a family member, as a potential danger. At first, I thought that this would lead us to distance not only physically but also emotionally from our brothers and sisters, that it would lead us to detach. Happily, I have not found this to be the case. In my own case, I have become much more conscious of those whose lives are profoundly affected by the medical, social, and financial impact of this pandemic. I hope we emerge from this ordeal, which we will do, with a deeper sense that we are all in this together. What happens in another country in a far-off corner of the world affects us all.

I also hope we can begin to see the importance of providing first-rate health care to every single person in our country. This not only enables a mother who is unemployed and is living on the edge of poverty to bring her sick child to their family doctor or the emergency room; it protects all of us. I hope we can also see the problem with having health insurance inextricably linked to profits and provided by companies, by employers. If we enter into a recession or, God forbid, a depression, and the number of unemployed

skyrockets, millions and millions of our brothers and sisters will be unable to access the medical resources that are available in this great country. I see this not as a political issue, but as a moral issue.

This year, as we journey to Easter, we are reflecting on passages of scripture that help us understand the events and teachings of Holy Week. So much happens during Holy Week that we hardly have time to take it all in. When we jump from the triumphal message of Palm Sunday to the triumphal message of Easter, we fail to grasp the profound depth and meaning of what happened in between.

Today we listened to the account of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet as recorded in the Gospel of John. This account also appears in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke with certain differences. No matter which account we read, this is one of the most beautiful and moving expressions of love in the Bible.

Let us begin by comparing the various accounts of this event. In John, the event occurs six days before Passover. It takes place in the town of Bethany, the home of Lazarus. At the dinner that has been prepared for Jesus, Martha serves. Mary, who is Lazarus's daughter and Martha's sister, takes a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anoints Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair.

Judas, who apparently is the treasurer of this little group of disciples, protests that the money could have been put to better use. Jesus tells Judas to back off, to leave Mary alone. He says that Mary bought the perfume and kept it for the day of his burial. Then he says, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Whereas in John the event occurs just before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, it happens after the entry. In Mark, as in John, the anointing takes place in Bethany, a town near Jerusalem. However, according to Mark it takes place at the home of Simon the leper. Mark tells us the woman was not Mary, the daughter of Lazarus, but simply "a woman." The woman comes in with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard. She breaks open the jar and pours the ointment on Jesus' head, not on his feet.

In Mark's account, it is not specifically Judas who complains about the waste of money but rather "some who were there." Jesus' overhears their grumblings and responds to them in the same words that are recorded in John. It ends, however, with

Jesus telling them, “Truly, I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Matthew’s account agrees with Mark, which is not surprising since Matthew had Mark’s gospel in front of him when he was writing his own. Matthew indicates that the anointing takes place in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper. The woman breaks open the alabaster jar and anoints Jesus’ head. This time it is the disciples who object. Jesus responds to them in the same words that are recorded in Mark, even the proclamation that the woman’s “good service,” preparing Jesus for his burial, should be proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Contrary to popular belief, when we look at what is actually recorded in the four gospels, the woman is not Mary Magdalene, at least not from what we know from three of these accounts. There is, however, an interesting parallel between Matthew and Mark’s “woman,” John’s “Mary, the daughter of Lazarus,” and the woman who is described in a separate but almost identical incident in Luke.

Luke tells of a sinful woman, a “woman of the city,” who anoints Jesus’ feet with ointment from an alabaster jar and wipes his feet with her hair. However, the anointing takes place much earlier in Jesus’ ministry, not during Holy Week. In Luke the theme is repentance and the forgiveness of the woman’s sins, not preparation for Jesus’ burial. Some people think this woman might have been Mary Magdalene.

From the scriptural accounts it seems that the woman must be a follower or a disciple of Jesus. She knows who he is. She knows him, and she knows him in depth. She knows where Jesus and the disciples are meeting. She also knows where they are going. She takes the initiative to encounter Jesus, and she prepares in advance for what she is going to do.

The woman must have been walking close enough to Jesus to hear him as he tells his disciples that he is going to suffer and die. Whereas the disciples are in denial about what is going to happen, the woman isn’t. The disciples prefer the public acclaim of Palm Sunday. The woman sees deeper. She believes what he has said about his suffering, about his death, and she prepares him for it through a beautiful act of love.

This marks her as an unusual woman, an unusual disciple. The woman seems to grasp the essence of Jesus’ teaching that a grain of wheat has to fall into the ground and

die before it can bear fruit. She accepts suffering and death as an integral part of life. In a beautiful act of love and devotion, she honors Jesus. She anoints him. This is her way of saying goodbye.

The woman, whether she is Mary the daughter of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, a woman, or a sinner, ministers to Jesus. Not many people minister to Jesus; Jesus usually ministers to them. But this woman does. She anoints his head with expensive perfume. She anoints his feet. Then she wipes them with her hair.

It was the custom in ancient Palestine to anoint the hair of a guest. The traveler would be covered with the dust of his journey. The servants of the house would put perfumed oil on the guest's head and wash his feet. It was beneath the dignity of the master of the house to do this.

This is what makes the woman's act so beautiful. She humbles herself before Jesus. She welcomes him as a guest, as a guest not into her house but into her life. This is what makes Jesus' last act with his disciples, his washing their feet, such an important lesson. Jesus not only tells his disciples about the importance of service, he shows them that one is never too important to serve.

I think it is fascinating how many women are woven into the heart of Jesus' life and his ministry. It begins with Mary, his mother, who is more important than Joseph, his father, even though Joseph is the one who ties Jesus to his ancestor, King David. We have the story of Martha and Mary, which finds echoes in John's account of the anointing. There is the woman caught in adultery, the woman whom Jesus forgives. There is the account of Jesus' revelation of who he is to the woman at the well. There is the woman who shames Jesus by her request that he heal her daughter. There is Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. And there is the woman who is healed of her affliction through touching the hem of Jesus' robe.

The church has not always honored women. In fact, the church has not always even acknowledged the important role of women in Jesus' life and in his ministry. A few verses speak of the women who followed Jesus and who supported him and his disciples. Two modern articulations of the true place of women in Jesus' life that touched many of us were the musical *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, where Mary Magdalene plays a central role, and Dan Brown's novel *The De Vinci Code*.

As we heard this morning, it is a woman who understands the deeper meaning of Jesus' teaching about how the grain of wheat has to die if it is to bear fruit. It is a woman who anoints him, preparing him for his burial. According to the gospel writers, several women are present at his crucifixion: Jesus' mother; his mother's sister; Mary the wife of Clopas; Mary the mother of James and Joseph; Mary Magdalene; Salome; and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Note that the women, not the men, go to the tomb to prepare his body for burial. And it is a woman, Mary Magdalene, who is the first disciple to encounter the risen Christ.

I'm not sure exactly what this means. I think it says something about the two sides of God, the masculine and the feminine. I think it says something about the two sides of Jesus, the masculine and the feminine. I think it says something about Jesus' feelings toward women. I think it says something about our religion, though this has not always been lifted up. I can think of no more feminine teaching than the Beatitudes.

I don't know if the woman who anoints Jesus is present at the crucifixion or at the empty tomb. She might have been there for one of these events or both. She certainly was close enough to Jesus to make this a possibility. On the other hand, perhaps she doesn't need to be there. Perhaps, through her great faith, through her great love, she has already rediscovered the risen Christ in her life.

Our celebration of Easter will be a very different experience this year. We will not be gathering by the side of the lake in Hopkinton at sunrise, nor will we be gathering in our beautiful sanctuary later Easter morning, a sanctuary filled with lilies. This year, confronted with the suffering that has been visited upon us by the pandemic, we deeply long for the true Easter experience, the experience of resurrection, of new life. As we prepare ourselves for this experience, let us remember the woman who loved Jesus, who reached out to him, who ministered to him. Then let us think about how we can do this, how we can love Jesus more deeply, and how we can minister to him in our own life.

Hint: it probably has to do with ministering to others, to our brothers and sisters, in whatever ways we can.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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