

Lent 5C

March 21, 2010

St. Andrew's

Isaiah 43.16-21

Ps 126

Philippians 3.4b-14

John 12.1-8

It's always nice to keep learning new things. A couple weeks ago Mark Schander came into the office with scriptural treasure to share. He had ordered three little vials of biblical oils. One of which is spikenard. The costly perfume of today's gospel that Mary put on Jesus' feet is believed to be spikenard. Mark looked up a few things about it and I did the same.

Referring once again to that always reliable and peer-reviewed journal Wikipedia, spikenard is a flowering plant of the Valerian family that grows in the Himalayas of China, India and Nepal. That is already sounding pretty exotic to me, but when you think of transporting something from China to Bethany, it sounds even more rare and precious. The plant grows to about a meter in height with pink flowers, but it is the underground rhizome which can be distilled into an aromatic oil. It is still used as a perfume and incense, but also as a sedative, and an herbal medicine said to fight insomnia, birth difficulties, and is useful as a diuretic and for ailments such as rashes.

Nard is mentioned many times in the Old Testament and at least once in each gospel's version of this story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet just before he heads into Jerusalem for the final time. A pound of nard was an exorbitant amount. Judas said it could have been sold for 300 denarii which was a year's wages; that's no surprise if it had been imported on the back of a donkey from India or China.

John's gospel is the only one which names this woman who anoints Jesus. Every now and then you see or hear something about this being Mary Magdalene but that is completely unsubstantiated. This is a part of scriptural reading and study that can get confusing at times. Each gospel writer has a similar story, but the details are changed. In Mark and Matthew the woman anoints Jesus' head at the house of Simon the Leper during the final week of his life. In Luke, we are at Simon the Pharisee's house much earlier in Jesus' ministry and it is a notorious sinner who slips in, weeps over his feet, covers them with kisses, and then anoints them with oil.

So in John's gospel, it is Mary, his friend, the sister of Martha who is in the kitchen again and Lazarus whom Jesus had just raised from the dead. She has been at his feet before, in the posture of a disciple as he taught when Martha complained to Jesus that she should be helping with the dishes. It was Mary kneeling at Jesus' feet saying that if he had been there, her brother Lazarus would not have died.

Jesus has come to the house of his friends, aware that the chief priests and Pharisees were looking for him. Raising Lazarus from the dead had changed his status with the authorities from “political nuisance” to “Most Wanted.” Perhaps Bethany and beloved friends provide him some respite, a brief and final occasion of rest before heading into Jerusalem to fulfill scripture.

After this meal, Mary has brought in the clay flask of nard and broken the neck of the jar. Some see Mary as prophet, aware at some level that Jesus was being prepared to die even before the disciples understood. It is anointing him for burial beforehand that makes this story part of the Passion narrative. Mary could comprehend and accept what Peter and the other disciples could not: the death of their master and Messiah.

But the story does seem over the top. Anointing his head would not have been unusual; it was what they did for kings as Samuel anointed the future King David and Jesus could have been anointed as the Messiah. But his feet, and then wiping them with her hair. Such expensive spikenard. It was more than Judas could stand. John tells us parenthetically that Judas didn't really have the poor at heart with his self-centered disdain about wasting the precious perfume. Judas was in charge of the money of the group who traveled with Jesus and the writer of John's gospel suggests that he was not honest in this task.

But I've wondered about the costliness as well. Didn't Jesus spend most of his ministry teaching about caring for the poor and putting their needs first? Three hundred denarii could buy a lot of groceries. It is a lavish and extravagant gesture and seems over the top to me, too. What church serious about discipleship does not struggle with the tension between money spent in beautiful furnishings and acts of worship and money spent on behalf of the poor?

Just like it is easy for some of us to relate to the angry, jealous older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or the Forgiving Father as we heard last week), and although I don't like to associate myself with Judas and his motives, I might have said the same thing. George Stroup writes that Judas plays just as important a role in John's story of Jesus' death as does Mary. The choice for us is not whether to identify with one or the other. The Christian disciple is neither Mary nor Judas but a paradoxical combination of both. Unfaithful Judas is no less a witness and disciple than Mary. But his presence casts a dark shadow of approaching death over this meal with a grateful family.

You may notice, though, that as the season of Lent is coming to a close, the lessons we have for today are not all dark and heavy. The Old Testament reading from Isaiah is filled with proclamations of salvation and celebration of the Lord's redemptive work. Even the great saving events of the past will pale into insignificance in comparison with the “new thing” the Lord will do. The psalm, like Lent, looks backward in remembrance to Israel's restoration, and forward to a time of joy. Paul speaks of the power of Christ's resurrection and pressing on for the prize of the heavenly call of God. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. Penitence and confession are nothing if they are not

followed by a renewed commitment to life with Jesus, seeing the signs of God's new thing even in a burial ointment.

The costly gift that Mary gives to Jesus is a precious substance, opened, poured, and used to the last drop. It fills the room with its fragrance. This extravagant gift of God's mercy made manifest will be demonstrated again, at someone else's feet, not too many days in the future. For Jesus, it will be only a few days until he shares the Last Supper with his friends. After that meal, it will be Jesus on his knees, a towel around his waist, humble, and washing their dirty, cracked and calloused feet.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that at least one disciple will argue with him and others may think he's lost it. But some will watch him washing their feet and remember Mary bending over his feet acting out his commandment to love each other, as he loved us. A more costly and extravagant act is about to occur. Taylor continues that this precious substance will not be saved. It will be broken open, offered and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop. Jesus received from Mary what he would offer his disciples: a costly and extravagant symbol of a disciple's life: washing and being washed. The images are clear. Do this. Be this. Remember this.

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