

March 21, 2010 5th Sunday in Lent
John 12:1-8

Without Being Told

Lent Monologue: *Mary of Bethany*

Jesus gave everything, spontaneously, generously, extravagantly, for us. Those who follow Jesus give everything, spontaneously, generously, extravagantly, to him. We will never know the truth of the Christian life, we will never discover the key to life itself, human existence will never be fulfilled until we can give it all up to him without being told.

Jesus has returned to Bethany, that small town just outside of Jerusalem. He returns to the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. It was here just a few days before that he raised Lazarus from the dead. As he returns to Bethany tensions are high and everybody knows it. Word has really been spreading about him, especially since Lazarus' miraculous resuscitation. For the religious and civil authorities of the time it is one thing to cure leprosy or drive out a demon, but to bring a man back to life after four long days in the tomb was more attention than they cared to consider. The leaders were in a panic. They did not want to provoke the Roman authorities to come down hard on them for not keeping everything at peace. "So," as the text says, "from that day on they planned to put him to death."

Nevertheless, their reunion there was joyous as Lazarus, who certainly must have been still trying to clear his head and get his legs back from his terrible yet miraculous experience, welcomes Jesus with open arms and his sisters prepare to host him, each in their own unique way. You can imagine, can't you, the men conversing together, Lazarus deep in admiration and gratitude to his Savior? Their conversation is joyously spirited on the surface, but tinged with

an undercurrent of deep concern and impending doom. Strange, isn't it, that the recently deceased Lazarus will outlive the savior Jesus of Nazareth? You can imagine, can't you, Martha busying herself preparing something for their nourishment with a wary, inviting, cautiously expectant eye on Mary, wondering if she will actually help out this time without being asked?

And sure enough, Mary follows her sister to the cupboard to return an expensive jar of perfume—maybe she is going to help this time. But wait a minute. What's that smell? That scent that is beginning to mask the still lingering smell of death in the air emanating from the freshly-empty tomb? The sharp scent of something halfway between mint and ginseng? She didn't spill it, did she? It would be just like her. Where is she going with it, anyway?

Sure enough, Mary, being Mary, senses the gravity and the privilege of the moment. The jar—it's still almost full of spikenard, the cherished ointment for which the family had saved up and sacrificed until they had accumulated an entire year's wages to purchase in order to properly prepare and anoint the bodies of their dead when the time came. As she carried it away Martha must have surely wondered what in the world Mary was going to do with the family's cherished balm left over from the burial of Lazarus.

But neither Martha nor Lazarus nor anyone else was prepared for what Mary did with it. She wants to do something, to give something, something extravagant, some appropriate gift for the one who has given the gift of life and about to give his own. She knows what she must do.

In a fashion quite out of character for her and certainly improper for a single woman, in a room full of men she let down her hair, pours perfume on his feet, touches him, and wipes off the balm with her hair--totally inappropriate in so many ways. A respectable single

woman never acts this way. Judas' points out the utter waste of her act in that it could have been sold to help the poor rather than poured all over the floor. Besides, if you're going to use ointment to anoint your Lord who had just raised your brother from the dead, you don't pour it on his feet, you anoint his head, as you honor a king.

As you know this is not the only Gospel account of the anointing of Jesus. In Matthew and Mark an unnamed woman anoints his head in the home of Simon the Leper a few days before Passover the last week of his life. In Luke a woman "of ill repute" covers his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair at the home of Simon the Pharisee much earlier in his ministry. Here, in the Gospel of John, we know who it is and we knew her to be of impeccable character, though her sister, Martha, may still have good reason to be wonder!

This text often trips us up with Judas' reference to the poor. But make no mistake about it, the only thing worse than not caring for the poor at all is to pretend to care for them, as does Judas who is the keeper and embezzler of the disciples' community purse. The Gospel writer is clear to point this out. If you want to know what Jesus really thought about the poor, this text is not it. You must look for the wisdom of Jesus on the care for the poor look in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection for the cause of the poor he championed. Make no mistake about it, of the two main actors in this scene of the life of Jesus, Mary and Judas, Mary is the heroine.

So Jesus says, "Leave her alone." It could have gone either way, you know. As she approached him with that pound of pure nard she could have anointed his head and they would have all found it an appropriate and deserving honor for one so generous and extravagant in his own life and ministry. But she doesn't do that. She falls to her knees and pours the perfume on his feet. As everyone in that room knew, that could only mean one thing. The only man who got his feet

anointed was a dead man, and Jesus knew it. “Leave her alone,” he says. Let her finish.

What is this unusual and striking scene all about? What does her response to her Lord just prior to his death have to do with ours in this season of Lent?

Barbara Brown Taylor, whose recent retelling of this story was a tremendous help to this preacher this morning, *The Prophet Mary* John 12:1-8
 5th Sunday in Lent - Year C March 21, 2010 Barbara Brown Taylor http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary

calls Mary a Prophet. Her strange behavior is not unlike that of other prophets such as Ezekiel eating the scroll of the Lord as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him (Ezekiel 2), or Jeremiah smashing the clay jar to show God’s judgement on Judah and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19), or Isaiah walking around barefoot and naked as an oracle against the nations (Isaiah 20). You see, prophets discern the truth of the moment, sometimes pointing out the obvious that no one else is ever willing to openly acknowledge. Prophets act out the true meaning of the moment, somehow expressing in action what words can never adequately express. Everybody knew what was going to happen to Jesus but nobody wanted to talk about it. But Mary knew she had to do something, to give something, some appropriate gift for one who has given the gift of life and about to give his own.

There are times, aren’t there, when words are never adequate to express the truth, the true meaning of the moment. At the funeral of my Aunt several years ago in Ohio the musicians played a popular Christian song that was just then being introduced to me. That song was so appropriate for that moment, when words seemed so inadequate to honor the memory of my grandmother’s sister, one of

our matriarchs of my father's family. That song expressed in music the profound truth that words can never adequately convey.

I Can Only Imagine

I can only imagine	I can only imagine
What it will be like	What my eyes will see
When I walk	When your face
By your side	Is before me
	I can only imagine

[Chorus:]

Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel
 Will I dance for you Jesus or in honour of you be still
 Will I stand in your presence or to my knees will I fall
 Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all
 I can only imagine

I can only imagine	I can only imagine
When that day comes	When all I will do
When I find myself	Is forever
Standing in the Son	Forever worship You
	I can only imagine

That's what this text is about. It invites us to imagine what we do in the presence of Jesus who gave his life that we might live; what we give in response to his generous, extravagant love; what we do when we want to do something, give something, some appropriate gift for the one who has given the gift of life by the gift of his own. It invites us to imagine the gift we bring, the spontaneous, extravagant, generous gift he surely deserves.

That's what this text is all about. And Mary did not have to imagine it. She was there. She knew the significance and gravity of the moment and she responded extravagantly, spontaneously, and generously without being told. And Jesus said, "Leave her alone." Let her finish.

That's the goal of the Christian life, isn't it? Isn't that the purpose of prayer? Isn't that why we witness? As the old catechism of the church says, "The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." To love God and serve God forever. The point is, if we can imagine it, can we do it? Will we ever get to the place in our lives where we really will give him everything, spontaneously, generously, extravagantly, without a second thought, with peace in our hearts that there will always be enough without being told?

You see, the text this morning invites us to not only imagine it but to do it. To do it.

But how do we do it? After all, Mary was there. We're here.

According to the Gospel of John this is not the end of the story. As the Gospel of John tells the of their last earthly gathering together a meal with bread and cup is not mentioned. Rather, their Lord strips to the waist, wraps a towel around himself, kneels before each of his disciples, and washes their feet. As their Lord's act of love calls to their minds Mary's act of devotion, perhaps they will leave him alone as he acts out what even his own words alone can never adequately express, "Love one another, as I have loved you." Maybe you and I will remember in this season of Lent the words of Jesus, "whenever you do it to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do it to me." Maybe our own spontaneous, generous, extravagant acts will somehow expel the smell of death all around us and proclaim once and for all the gift of life.

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Maybe we will, one day, become so mature in our faith, so faithful in our service, that we will give it all up to him without being told.

William G. Davidson