

Costly – A Life Poured Out

Text: John 12: 1-8

Isn't it amazing that as human beings we are drawn to stories of the lives of people who give themselves wholeheartedly to a cause or to a dream or to living life to the full?

It stirs us. And when we are young we find ourselves saying with abandon:
I want to be like that.

The gospel before us contrasts two states of heart:

- This woman, Mary of Bethany (as she is named here in John's gospel) - a generous wholehearted life, abandoned to a prophetic act.
- And a man, Judas (who would betray Jesus – but it could be any one of us) who is holding back. Hiding behind the words: What about....? This is great, but what about...? Often a tactic of deflection.

There are times in my life where I am the generous wholehearted woman, pouring out my life. Being in flow – using all my gifts without a hint of self- consciousness. Pure joy. And everyone around is drawn into the flow.

And I confess there are times when, in my fear, in my doubt, in my hurt, in my jealousy, in my grief – I hold myself back. And I distance from others, and there is little joy.

I remember one of the reasons I became attracted to my first husband, Alex, was his wholehearted desire to be generous with his life.

He was 23 years old, working for Accenture, one of the most prestigious management consulting firms in South Africa. His aim was to save up for seminary, which he did. And then it was time to resign and leave the firm. He received an amazing financial package when he left and while I was thinking about everything we could do with that money, Alex had other plans.

He had a friend, a Shangaani man, who was working as a nurse in an extended care unit, also saving for theological school – for seminary. But it would take one more year for his to get there. Alex went to the bank and anonymously gifted this man with enough money to begin his studies.

After Alex's death, I found written in the front of his Bible the verse from Paul's letter to Timothy:

“As for me, my life is being poured out like a drink offering”

Poured out.

Wholehearted generosity.

This lent we have learned from lives of service – women and men who lived well.

George MacLeod

Dorothy Day

John Muir

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

And today let's meet Hildegard of Bingen... a visionary of the 12th century.

Whose desire was to be a feather on the breath of God.

She wrote:

“...It pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God.”

Hildegard is a remarkable figure, and helpful for us moderns – because she sought to live out the values of Jesus, values of ‘May your Kingdom Come’ - not by striving, or motivated by guilt— but as a loving response to the wonder of being borne up by the breath of God.

This incredible woman was born in 1098.

She was born with many childhood illnesses, that kept her from becoming social, and from the beauty of her peers. Some sources indicate that she was the 10th child of a noble family, And she was dedicated to the church as their tithe.

The girl started to have visions of luminous objects at the age of three, but soon realized she was unique in this ability and hid this gift for many years.

At age 8, the family sent this strange girl to an anchoress named Jutta to receive a religious education.

Anchors of both sexes, though from most accounts they seem to be largely women, led an ascetic life, shut off from the world inside a small room, usually built adjacent to a church so that they could follow the services, with only a small window acting as their link to the rest of humanity.

Most of the time would be spent in prayer, contemplation, or solitary handworking activities, like stitching and embroidering.

During these years Hildegard confided of her visions only to Jutta and another monk, named Volmar, who was to become her lifelong secretary. However, in 1141, Hildegard had a vision that changed the course of her life. A vision of God gave her instant understanding of the meaning of the religious texts, and commanded her to write down everything she would observe in her visions.

“And it came to pass ... when I was 42 years and 7 months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming... and suddenly I understood of the meaning of expositions of the books...”

Yet Hildegard was also overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and hesitated to act.

This was a time when few women wrote. With the blessing of Pope Eugenius, she became a prolific author and her fame began to spread through Germany and beyond.

Hildegard, known in her writings as "Sybil of the Rhine", produced major works of theology and visionary writings.

She started her own convent in 1150 in Bingen.

She advised bishops, popes, and kings.

She used the curative powers of natural objects for healing, and wrote treatises about natural history and medicinal uses of plants, animals, trees and stones.

She wrote music and texts to her songs, mostly liturgical plainchant.

For me, the most wonderful theological gift of Hildegard is the idea of *Viriditas*.

Christine Valters Painter describes it this way:

One of her great gifts was insight into what she called *viriditas*, or the greening power of God, the life force at work in all of creation. This central creative principle was key for Hildegard in understanding the vibrancy of her soul and her work. *Viriditas* is the

force sustaining life each moment, bringing newness to birth. It is a marvelous image of the divine power continuously at work in the world, juicy and fecund.

We often experience our life as a kind of wandering through the desert, experiencing the sparseness of the landscape. But there is another side to the desert. The prophet Isaiah writes that “the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing” (Is 35:1–2).

This abundant blossoming is the provenance of *viriditas*. We are called to wander through the desert tending to the abundant gifts of *viriditas*, the creative life-giving force at the heart of everything alive. Hildegard’s wisdom is for living a life that

is fruitful and green and overflowing with verdancy. She calls us to look for fecundity in barren places.

May God keep us humbled by the knowledge that we receive our very breath and life from God; may God embolden us by the same fact.

In honor of Hildegard, and to the glory of God, today I will pour my life into creative acts, like expensive perfume.

Amen.