

Lent 5C

John 12.1-8

Sunday, April 3, 2022

There's nothing quite like the smell of homemade bread. The sweet aroma of baking dough permeates not only the kitchen but spills over into the other rooms of a house. Thanksgiving dinner is another moment where the sweet scent of turkey or pies or sides of what have you fill a house. We all know the power of our such smells. In an instant we are transported back to a time in life or an experience that is permanently stamped with a particular aroma. Such smells are powerful and remind us of this often underutilized sense that we possess.

In today's gospel story, the fragrance of Mary's humble act of anointing Jesus fills the house in which they and others reside. And the power of her story may not fill our space with the fragrance of perfume, but her act of love surely abides.

Within mystical Judaism, there is a phrase known as Tzadikim Nistarim. It is the belief that there exist thirty-six righteous people whose role in life is to justify the purpose of humanity in the eyes of God. Their identities are unknown to each other and that, if one of them comes to a realization of their true purpose, they would never admit it. Indeed, should a person claim to be one of the 36, that is proof positive that they certainly are not one. The 36 are each exemplars of *anavah*, ("humility"), having such a virtue would preclude against the self-proclamation of being among the special righteous. The 36 are simply too humble to believe that they are one of the 36.

I often think that Mary's role in the gospels and, particularly, in today's text is to function as a Tzadikim Nistarim. It may not be evident how she justifies the purpose of humanity in the eyes of God by anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume and wiping them with her hair. However, I think the case can be made that in her humility she signifies a critical turning point in the life of Jesus that possesses import for what transpires next in his life and deep impact for the life of the world that follows. The purpose of humanity is captured in her act of generosity, graciousness, humility, and love.

The fact that she is the one who anoints Jesus is also important. In the world--and certainly in the Bible--it is often men who anoint other men. So Samuel anoints Saul. Popes anoint emperors. Yet, here, Mary anoints Jesus. Not by anointing his head which is often the practice, but rather, Mary anoints Jesus' feet. The intimacy of the act is palpable. Who among us doesn't squirm a little bit at the idea of having our feet washed or washing another's feet? Furthermore, the extraordinariness of this act is often lost. The act was powerful in and of itself. The fact that the perfume cost an inordinate amount is understated. One commentator noted that it would be as if someone earning minimum wage spent \$18,000.00 on perfume. The gift is unbelievable.

Another interesting aspect of the story is the juxtaposition of Mary with Judas. Mary is the exemplar of generosity, graciousness, humility, and love. Judas is perhaps the polar opposite. Seemingly selfish, gauche, proud, and self-absorbed. He certainly does not come off well in today's text. Where Mary expresses great devotion, Judas is marked as a greedy money grubber. The writer of the text goes out of his way to refute any potentially positive act of Judas and to underscore his greed. The parenthetical is pitiless: (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.)

Yet, while Mary's act of devotion is recognized in this story, Judas' role--and his self-centered preoccupation--in the larger narrative is also important. There is a part of the tradition that sees Judas' betrayal of Jesus as a necessary act. Indeed, when you think about Judas' actions from the perspective of a first-century Jewish follower, these actions may not be so far beyond the pale. If Jesus is the hoped for Messiah of people like Judas, then, for them at least, Israel was going to return to power and the Roman occupiers would be driven out. Far from betraying Jesus into what we know as the tragic circumstances that we will observe in two weeks, Judas may very well have understood his actions as lighting the spark that would begin the revolution.

Again, we view Judas' actions through the particular lens of how we interpret Jesus' Messiahship. We say that it was necessary for him to be arrested, suffer at the hands of the Romans, die, and then be raised. Yet, we know because of how the disciples act towards Jesus that they were either pitifully stupid or expecting something entirely different. A kind reading of the situation trusts the latter is true. They wanted a Messiah to not simply save the souls of the people. They wanted a Messiah to save the very lives of the people in time and save them from the powers that oppressed them. They saw not a spiritual Moses moving the soul of humanity through the figurative Red Sea to a mystical promised land. They expected a real Moses to lead the people into a land flowing with milk and honey that was their own and Rome's no more.

Thus we have two models of Christian discipleship in the story today. Mary's model is the more palatable. Yet our discipleship is neither Mary nor Judas. Paradoxically our discipleship is a combination of both. As one commentator notes:

Mary shows us what sanctification truly is. In the figure of Mary, Christian discipleship is an act of adoration of and gratitude to the one who alone is holy. In her silence, Mary draws our attention not to herself but to the one she anoints. In the figure of Judas, Christian discipleship is God's making righteous or "[justifying] those who have rejected and betrayed Jesus. In John's all-encompassing Gospel, Mary is not simply the righteous elect and Judas the unrighteous betrayer. The grace of Jesus Christ includes them both, both the faithful and the unfaithful. Both are included within the bright, transforming light the cross casts in a dark world.

What it means for us, in part, is to recognize the tension that exists within our being. The moments that we see clearly and act faithfully, as well as the moments where we are uncertain and act selfishly or proudly and betray what it is that God has called us to. In the same way as the whiff of freshly baked bread or that Thanksgiving dinner brings us immediately back to a moment or experience, so today's text functions as a powerful reminder of who we are. Mary and Judas at the same time. Blessed are we because of God's grace in Christ that recognizes both, accepts them, forgives, and loves. Because of this truth, we are invited to live out our calling as God's children, or, perhaps, as a part of the Tzadikim Nistarim. To be one of the 36. Hidden. Unknown. Yet, acting always to justify humanity before God, or, better yet, to embody God to a world sore in need of such grace.