

Lent 5C (4/7/2019)

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

True love doesn't count the cost. It's unmeasured, audacious, even foolish. That's why true love offends. It pays no heed to our careful calculations and often provokes resistance. But true love has its reasons, and it will not be denied.

Our Gospel from John boasts an embarrassment of riches, more details to challenge and enlighten us than the preacher could ever honor in a single sermon. Maybe that's why we encounter this story every three years. We're bound to be struck by something new, something significant each time we hear it. The possibilities are multiplied further by the fact that all four Gospels include a version of the story of Jesus' anointing, each one distinct. Reading closely enough to approach each account on its own terms is a challenge, but **the abundance of meaning is not so much a burden as it is a gift, like the fragrance of the perfume that fills the house at Bethany.**

The wealth of possibilities for making sense of a Gospel story, however, can be undermined by popular, sometimes erroneous, interpretations. The identity of the woman who anoints Jesus is a prime example. Mark and Matthew simply refer to her as "a woman," while Luke calls her "a woman in the city, who was a sinner." But John identifies her by name: Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Note that this is not Mary Magdalene, who has often been mistakenly cast in this role, and wrongly maligned on account of Luke's vague reference to the woman's "sinfulness."

No, Mary of Bethany is the protagonist in John's version of the story, and her anointing of Jesus has nothing to do with sin and forgiveness. **In contrast to Judas'**

self-interested and disingenuous chatter, Mary quietly exemplifies true discipleship. Recognizing Jesus for who he is, and acknowledging the high cost of his faithfulness – his impending death at the hands of abusive power – Mary counts no cost in anointing him for his burial. Throwing caution to the wind, she kneels before him and pours an entire pound of fragrant oil, valued at perhaps a year’s wages, on his feet. What’s more, in a dramatic and unexpected gesture of devotion, she lets down her hair and wipes Jesus’ feet, while the scent of the perfume overwhelms the whole house.

It’s a stunning expression of love. And, as an act of profligate generosity, it engenders criticism. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” Judas complains. Even if Judas’ protest were genuine – even if he were truly concerned about the wise stewardship of resources – he would be missing the point. An extravagant gift tends to make people uncomfortable, either because it defies their utilitarian inclinations, or because it exposes their own stinginess. In any case, questioning generosity is a deflection, diverting attention away from the power of the gift itself.¹

But Jesus graciously receives the gift, rebuking Judas and recentering Mary. “Leave her alone,” he says. “She bought [the perfume] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” Love has its reasons, and Mary’s wastefulness is faithful in this instance.²

A closer look at the text reveals that the story of Jesus’ anointing in John parallels the story of the Last Supper. The verb “to wipe” is the same in both texts, connecting

¹ William G. Carter, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 140-2.

² *Ibid.* 142.

Mary's act of wiping the ointment from Jesus' feet with Jesus' own act of wiping the feet of his disciples after washing them. "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet," he insists, "you also ought to wash one another's feet."³ That is, *love one another as I have loved you*. It's the great commandment, and it's epitomized by the example that Jesus sets for them.

The act of washing and being washed, in other words, is a symbol of Christian discipleship.⁴ And, this pattern is prefigured a chapter earlier in Mary's anointing, which is significant because it makes Mary the first in the Gospel of John to model true love; she fulfills the love commandment before Jesus even teaches it.⁵

We imagine Jesus to be completely autonomous, completely in control in the Gospel of John. But, could it be that, like his mother Mary's prompting at the wedding at Cana, Mary of Bethany's lavish act of devotion encourages Jesus to take the next critical steps in his ministry? **Could it be that Mary moves him into the hour of his own extravagant sacrifice? After all, love is empowering; it allows us to live more confidently into our identity and purpose, especially when the prospects are daunting.**⁶ **Could it be that Jesus is as eager to receive the love of his friends as he is to offer his love to us?**

Not to be left hanging is the question of the poor. Incredibly, Jesus' statement about always having the poor with us has been twisted to exempt disciples from responsibility toward the poor. The phrase, however, is rooted in Deuteronomy: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open

³ John 13:14.

⁴ H. Stephen Shoemaker, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, 143.

⁵ Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 703.

⁶ Karoline Lewis, "Sermon Brainwave #656," http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1120.

your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”⁷ Clearly, Jesus doesn’t intend for his followers to neglect the poor. On the contrary, the poor bear his likeness.⁸ To quote one interpreter, “The poor that we always have with us is Jesus [himself]. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given.”⁹

Dear church, there’s no doubt that love costs something. But, **true love doesn’t count the cost. It’s unmeasured, audacious, even foolish. That’s why true love offends. It pays no heed to our careful calculations and often provokes resistance. But true love has its reasons, and it will not be denied.**

⁷ 15:11.

⁸ Matthew 25:35-36.

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, cited by Shoemaker, 145.