

March 6, 2016
“Mary’s Wild Love”
The 23rd Psalm John 12:1-8
First United Church of Arvada
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Even when it simply stands alone, this story of Jesus’ friend, Mary, anointing his feet and wiping them with her hair is fascinating. But put in its literary and historical context in the Gospel of John, it becomes even more powerfully interesting. You might remember that today’s story of anointing directly *follows* the mind-boggling story of the raising of Lazarus in the scriptural text. Now, we find Lazarus, a man come back from death, sitting at the table in his family home, with Jesus and the others. And this story comes immediately *before* the story of the crowds waving the Palms along Jesus’ final path to Jerusalem. It is sandwiched between these two very dramatic stories and is certainly connected to both of them. The socio-political atmosphere just outside this intimate gathering of friends, has really heated up—in fact, it is reaching the boiling point.

You might remember that the writer of John sees the events of Jesus’ life as “signs,” whereas, the events of Jesus’ life are expressed for slightly different purposes by the writers of the other Gospels. The sole purpose of these signs for John’s Gospel is to point beyond Jesus acts and miracles to the proclamation of him as the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus’ action in bringing Lazarus back from the dead is such a sign. This amazing sign brings many more people to Jesus, leading to what came to be called Palm Sunday. It also makes his enemies, more determined than ever to kill him, hoping to bring his power to an end and reinstate their own power.

There are many pieces of today’s story that connect to other events. Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet helps the listener look ahead to Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet. This similarity suggests Mary’s true discipleship and her understanding of Jesus’ commandment to love and serve one another. This message

of servant-hood is the one relived in our Maundy Thursday rituals. The fragrant smell of the perfume is in sharp contrast to the stench of death—both of Lazarus' and of Jesus' death to come. It contrasts Mary's way of life, with Judas'. It is a contrast between love and fear--between abundant life and the power of death.

Jesus' dear friend, Mary, knows that matters have come to a crisis moment. She feels it. She senses it. No doubt she is anxious about it, but her response is not a reactive tightening up against the horror of it all but rather letting go in unrestrained affection. Mary's outpouring of love in the form of touch is her way of living out her devotion to Jesus and to his way of life. This response is in sharp contrast to that of another familiar figure in the room, Judas. Judas responds to the anxious moment with skepticism and disapproval. He stands outside the experience that is engulfing everyone in the room. He questions what he is seeing. The extravagance of the expensive oil used to anoint Jesus' feet, represents money, which he suggests could have been better spent to feed the poor. On the surface his argument is a good one. I have used this kind of reasoning myself quite often. "Look at what the wealthy, the 1% are earning or spending. Their wealth could do so much to stop the suffering around them. Heck it could feed and shelter a small country."

Judas' argument is not wrong, but his intentions in this moment are dubious—they ring false. Of course, we have the benefit of knowing what happens next in the story, what Judas is about to do, to betray Jesus. The Gospel writer also had this knowledge since John's Gospel wasn't written until about 70 years after Jesus' death. But even without this knowledge we can sense Judas' subtle betrayal even here in this intimately shared moment of open grief by Jesus' beloved followers.

It was Christmastime when my own dear father, learned of his diagnosis of cancer. Being a doctor, he knew its meaning and the likelihood of his death in the next few

months. Dad had always been a good and agile dancer. Cutting the rug with Mother they jitterbugged together in the living room, on many happy family occasions. Dad had four daughters, no sons, and we all adored him. As children, we watched mom and dad, both such hard workers and responsible adults, become so happy and free of all worry and concern when they danced. One evening during this terrible December, knowing it would be our last Christmas together, we turned up the music, rolled up the rug and took turns dancing with Dad—one man, five women, each of us eager to hold him in our arms and rejoice in his life and his gentle and compassionate soul, with one last dance. Not holy words, not practical future planning, but lively rhythm and tender touch mattered now. I will always remember that evening-- so sad and so beautiful, so sacred to all of us.

Mary, knowing what was to come, embraced this tender final occasion with her devoted teacher with her whole being. She lavishly poured the expensive perfume, filling the room with its scent, so that all there gathered were enveloped within it. One might imagine that for days and years to come, even the tiniest smell of that perfume, would bring back the memory of that precious time together.

The Austrian Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this,

Have patience with everything that is unsolved in your heart and.. try to cherish the questions themselves, like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange tongue. Do not search now for the answers, which cannot be given you because you could not live them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually without noticing it, one distant day live right into the answer.

“It is a matter of living everything” -- opening our own being up to the great forces of life. When instead we foreclose on life’s complexities and sorrows by coming up with or applying ready answers to them, we are not actually expressing meaning but are rather protecting and defending ourselves from our deepest experiences. Mary, in her wild love, was not holding anything back, even in this poignant and anxious

time. Judas, across the room, locked in his mental gymnastics couldn't enter the moment, couldn't let go into love. When we lead into life with love, real love, we abandon ourselves to love's new parameters of radical acceptance and deep devotion. All real love is wild love. All real love is extravagant love. Love unhinges us from whatever we thought we had all figured out and under our control. Love of God or love of our neighbor: love of spouse, of sister or brother, of friend, of our children or grandchildren: all these loves break us out of the confines of our egos into the vulnerability of deep connection. But even in its extravagance, or over-generousness, it does not diminish us, but enriches us infinitely.

Mary was called to speak her communion with Christ, not with words but with the gestures of love. The great 20th Century mystic, Thomas Merton, gave a talk in Calcutta, India, only a month before his early death, ending with these words.

...the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. (If we are faithful to our own calling, our own message from God) we discover an older unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not... what we have to recover is our original unity. We have to be what we are.

Let's listen once more to today's psalm.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

God continues to nourish us even when we feel most vulnerable. God believes in us and provides us with the energy to follow our callings. Anointing is a symbol of both health and calling. God sets us aside for a purpose and guides us along the path, and

if we lose the path, forgives and welcomes us back.“ **WHAT IS GOD PREPARING YOU TO DO? “**

Use a bit of oil to make the sign of the cross on your forehead or on the back of your hand. Remember that you belong to God, that God shepherds you and calls you his own. You are invited now to come to the center prayer table or any of the prayer stations around the sanctuary.