

Lent 5C

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March 21, 2010

Be Quick to Love

They are all there gathered in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus as they had done many times before: Jesus and his three friends and his disciples all together for a feast. Jesus has just performed his greatest miracle. He has brought Lazarus back to life. In the midst of the celebration, dread and fear fill the air. By raising his friend from the dead Jesus has become a serious threat to the religious authorities. His days are numbered and he knows it. Everyone in that room knows it. Martha is busy in the kitchen preparing the meal. The men are sitting around the table, deep in conversation. Maybe they are strategizing their next move. Do they go to Jerusalem for Passover? How do they keep their Master in hiding? Judas, the practical and pragmatic one in the group may be thinking about how they are going to keep this operation going now that their leader is in serious trouble.

As is her custom Mary slips away without anyone knowing. She slips away from all the activity in the kitchen and at the table. Something deep within Mary, maybe her intuition, maybe the Holy Spirit tells her to go get that jar of oil, the oil that she and her sister had used only days earlier to prepare her brother's body for burial. In silence she goes to Jesus and kneels before him with the jar in her hands. Then Mary does four things that must have caused great shock in the room. First she lets down her hair in front of all the men. Ladies don't do such a thing in polite company. She then pours the oil on Jesus' feet which is only done in burial rites. Pouring it on his head to signify his kingship would have been understood, but not on his feet. She then touches his feet-again something a single woman would never have dared do, even with a close

friend. Finally, Mary does something that perplexes even the greatest Biblical scholars, she wipes off the perfumed oil with her hair.

Judas can not stand back and keep quiet. This is all too excessive. Putting aside those editorial comments believed to be added by later by the gospeler, John, Judas' concern is not all that unreasonable. Knowing that they need money to keep this ministry up and running, Judas is horrified by the wastefulness of Mary's actions. The oil could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. But Jesus quickly defends Mary. Mary knows, as does Jesus that they don't have much time left together. This will in fact be one of their last meals together. Six days from now Jesus will hang from that tree in Calvary. Pragmatism is thrown out the window. No more time to waste. Holding nothing back, Mary pours out her love, devotion and gratitude to her dear friend in this extravagant, public act.

In fact, Mary's act foreshadows Jesus' sacrifice on the cross-God's excessive, extravagant love poured out for the world through his only Son's death. As the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "There will be nothing economical about this man's death, just as there has been nothing economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest. This bottle will not be held back to be kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, offered and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop."

I imagine that just as this public display of affection made the eyewitnesses to Mary's act of devotion feel uncomfortable, it makes us uncomfortable, as well. This is too close for comfort. Without giving it a second thought we may react just like Judas. "Oh, come on, Mary! Isn't this a little excessive-the expensive perfume, rubbing Jesus' feet,

your hair wiping up the oil?" Why do we hold back from freely sharing our love and devotion? What are we waiting for?

There is a scene in the movie Moonstruck between the two main characters Loretta and Ronnie played by Cher and Nicholas Cage. Loretta is the practical Judas and Ronnie is the passionate, reckless Mary. The scene is a turning point in their budding romance. Pleading with her not to walk away from this relationship, Ronnie says, "Loretta, I love you. Not like they told you love is, and I didn't know this either, but love don't make things nice - it ruins everything. It breaks your heart. It makes things a mess. We aren't here to make things perfect. The snowflakes are perfect. The stars are perfect. Not us! We are here to ruin ourselves and to break our hearts and love and *die*."

Love is messy and complicated and painful. It is rarely, if every pragmatic or sensible. And when it comes down to it, we don't have the time to waste in pondering whether it is the sensible thing to do. We are called to love with the same recklessness and extravagance as Mary did. The words that kept coming back to me this week as I reflected on this story are the words from the blessing I offer at the end of many services, "Life is short. And we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So be quick to love and make haste to be kind." Friends, there is no time for us to waste. Life is too short. May we have the courage as Mary did to throw caution to wind and to pour out our love until our hearts break. It is in the end the only way to live. It is in the end the only way that leads to our redemption. *Amen.*