

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

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Year C

The Extravagance of Love

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, Amen.

The tender eroticism of Mary's anointing of Jesus with her hair and costly perfume occurs in silence, a sacred silence beyond words in the midst of a dinner party to celebrate the resurrection of Lazarus.

What is also unspoken is that Jesus sealed his fate by raising Lazarus from the dead because no one now can deny that his powers are anything other than divine. Mary, who berated Jesus when he first arrived at the house with words that cut like daggers – "Surely if you had been here my brother would not have died" is now massaging the costliest oil imaginable into Jesus' weary feet because she knows he will soon die.

She needs no words. Her actions proclaim: "This is my body which is given for you." Mary is the embodiment of love—loving Jesus in the flesh, hands, skin, feet, hair, pouring her whole being into loving him. Extravagantly and defiantly. Because that's what love does when time is running out.

Mary knew loosening her hair in the presence of men was forbidden but that didn't stop her. Nor could a single woman touch the body of single man. But that didn't stop her. Nothing could. She knew what she was doing when she cracked open the bottle of nard and dumped it on Jesus' feet. She could have said "Go ahead, try and stop me" as she massaged the costly perfume through Jesus feet with her hair but by then, who would have dared?

"Leave her alone!" Jesus said after Judas – yes, Judas-- suggested the nard could have been sold to benefit the poor.

"She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Jesus is being dismissive of the poor. That's a cheap and easy way to hijack the power of this text and ignore the heart of his ministry. Commentators suggest instead that Jesus is referring back to Deuteronomy 15:11 in which God says to the Israelites saying: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded."

This is the work of our lives, all our lives, as followers Jesus. But there are moments when we are called to love as God loves, extravagantly, beyond reason and rules.

Imagine if after saying, “but you do not always have me...” Jesus said, so let me be loved before I die.”

Mary’s actions were a response words she might have perceived but were never said.

Could any moment be more human and tender than that? We are used Jesus speaking in enigmatic parables, or answering questions with questions: “Who do you say I am?” that in moments when Jesus lets his feelings show—in anger at the Syrophoenician woman, or in weeping for his dead friend, Lazarus,— and especially yearning for the tenderness of intimate touch-- we feel almost embarrassingly self-conscious, not because we don’t recognize him, but because we do.

It is much easier if we see Jesus as divine to maintain our separation from him. John begins by saying the word was made flesh. And yet, Jesus in the flesh? Embodiment challenges religion. But not for Mary who knew no shame in what she was doing, only love. She was on fire with her love. Her beloved friend, Jesus, had, in effect, given his life for her brother.

And she gave all she had to give, breaking open the bottle of perfuming and sanctifying his dusty, dirty, and weary feet.

Like a true prophet, she proclaimed by her actions words no one wanted to speak or hear. Only the dead are anointed and her act was an anointing of a death foretold.

And by anointing his feet, Mary also proclaimed Jesus as a messiah—the anointed one—not as a king whose head would have been anointed in following tradition.

Writes Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor: (*Bread of Angels*)

Whatever Mary thought about what she did, and whatever anyone else in the room thought about it, Jesus knew it was a message from God...The air was dense with death and while there may at first have been some doubt about whose death it was, Mary’s prophetic act revealed the truth. She was anointing Jesus for his burial...Prophets do these things. They act out the truth that no one else can see and those who stand around watching either write them off as crazy or fall silent before the disturbing news they bring from God.

Mary proved not only prophetic, but a more faithful disciple than any of the 12 who refused to listen to Jesus when he told them he would die. Remember that furious rebuke to Peter? “Get behind me Satan?”

Each of the four gospels tell this story in a slightly different way. John's Gospel is the only one that names Mary as Mary of Bethany. But all tell a story that is the most sensual in the New Testament, writes Debie Thomas in "Journey with Jesus." (6/5/16)

No matter how hard we try to theologize or intellectualize it away, the story is naked-making. It exposes, it confronts, it directs our gaze. It's a story about the body. What the body is. What the body knows. Feet. Tears. Perfume. Hair. All four Gospels tell it, the scandalous story of a woman who dared to love Jesus in the flesh—to love his spirit and his body with her own.

And she did it extravagantly. This was the last supper Jesus would have with his friends. And it foreshadows the Last Supper he will have with his disciples five days later. He will share a meal and extravagantly offer all of himself – embodied – in the simplicity of bread and wine—so we will forever know him not only words and spirit, but in the flesh. And then Jesus will wash his disciples' feet, commanding them to love one another as he had loved them.

This is our commandment, too, to love one another.

"But what is it about Mary's extravagance that merits Jesus blessing?" asks Debie Thomas. Her answer which I think is one for us all, is that "Mary responds to the call of love *in the moment.*"

Mary acts...Mary chooses the here and now. She loves the body and soul who is placed in her presence. In doing so, she ends up caring for the one who is denied room at the Inn—even to be born. For the one who has no place to lay his head during his years of ministry. For the one whose crucified body is laid in a borrowed tomb. It *is* the poor Mary serves when she serves Jesus. Just as it always Jesus we serve when we love without reservation what God places in front of us, here and now.

Mary knew the extravagance of her love had nothing to do with the cost of the perfume in the alabaster jar. The most lavish love any of us have to give is poured out with our whole hearts.

AMEN

1. *The Prophet Mary*, sermon by The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, Piedmont College and Columbia Serminary. John 12: 1-8, 5th Sunday of Lent Year C, March 21, 2010