

“Towel, Please!”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 21, 2010

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 42:1-9

Rev. John Wahl

John 12:1-8

I recently heard a story from a colleague which seems to be all-too-familiar. His small church was faced with a budget deficit and the growing prospect of having to eliminate staff or programs in order to stay solvent. By last summer, despite an appeal to members and additional fundraisers, they projected a year-end shortfall of about \$10,000.

But, one day, a very unfamiliar thing happened: a man called the office asking if he could speak to the pastor. Twenty years ago, he said, his kids had gone to the church's preschool, and the family had fond memories of the church. He had a winning lottery ticket, he told the pastor, which happened to be worth \$10,000. His family now really didn't need the money, they had decided, and was wondering if the church would be interested in cashing the winning ticket instead.

As happy as I was for our sister church's good fortune, a part of me – at the same time – harbored the thought: “why them, and not us?” Maybe some of you had that thought as well. For some reason, we instinctively believe that good fortune – or extravagant grace, if that is what you would call it – is a limited commodity.

This morning, we heard the story of Mary's extravagant gift. We're told that the jarful of pure nard which was poured on Jesus' feet was worth three-hundred *denarii* – equal to a full year's wages – which could have been sold with proceeds given to help the poor. While the strong scent of the perfume must have lingered in the air for a while, it would not be hard to view this act as being like pouring money down the drain. Judas seems to have seen it this way - even if his motives are less than pure. But, maybe the other disciples were thinking the same thing: that Mary's gift was a waste of good money.

But, Mary doesn't let anything hold her back. She does things not acceptable in polite company in that culture and time: she unbinds her hair, loosens it as women did only for their husbands or when they were in mourning; she pours expensive balm on the feet of Jesus and Mary touches Jesus even though she's a single woman, not appropriate, and then she wipes his feet not with a towel, but with her hair. No inhibition indeed!¹

¹ Kate Huey, *Weekly Seeds*

“Just days before,” Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, “Jesus had worked a miracle at this house. He had been across the river when an urgent message from Mary and her sister Mary reached him. “Lord,” it read, “he whom you love is ill.” So Jesus had come to them, knowing full well it was too late. Lazarus was so dead that he stank, so dead that Jesus stood in front of his tomb and wept. Then Jesus roared so loud at death that he scared death and many of its mourners away. While the sisters tried to decide whether to run away too, their brother Lazarus came stumbling from his tomb, trailing his shroud behind him like a used cocoon.”²

In Jesus’ eyes, the gift of thanksgiving that Mary gave to him had no price. He tells those present at the dinner party to leave Mary alone, for she has done for him what nobody else could have done; and she gave it to Jesus because he had done what nobody else could have done: he raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. This was the same Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet, listening to his teaching. She now chose to kneel at his feet again, because she could see that by bringing her brother back to life, Jesus had sealed the fate of his own death. She loved Jesus, her teacher, so completely that nothing was too much to give to him. She would offer him her most priceless treasure and risk the scorn of the other guests by wiping his feet with her hair.

This story of Jesus being anointed with oil is common to all four Gospels, but only here in John is the woman doing the anointing identified by name. Some suggest that maybe the unnamed servant – in the other accounts – was Mary of Magdala, the one Jesus redeemed from her many sins. If true, then again, the motive for the priceless gift would be unbounded gratitude.

Beyond these two disciples named Mary, possibly the only other person to touch Jesus’ feet was a third Mary, his mother. These three women represent the people that loved Jesus the most; those who were willing to give of themselves completely; those who stayed by his side until the very end. Their acts of love and generosity likely helped to form his character. To them he gave the most and from them he received the most.

This past Tuesday, I had the opportunity to go to the Seminary in Pittsburgh for a Continuing Education event. It provided a great opportunity to have conversations with other ministers who work in similar settings; to listen and see how they handle programs, priorities and people in their own call.

At lunch, I sat with a young woman who looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t figure out why. When she stood up and I saw her nametag, something clicked in my mind and I cautiously asked her if she ever had lived in Kentucky. No, she said, but her parents did before she was born. As it turns out, they were students at the seminary in Louisville in the late seventies, they attended my church, and her

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Prophet Mary”

mother used to be my Sunday School teacher; fourth grade, I recalled. Not that I believed her at the time, but she was the first person to ever tell me that someday I might be a minister.

After lunch, I worked on a project with another minister from a small town in Pennsylvania. Her predecessor at the church had been brought up on disciplinary charges which caused much division within the church. For the last three years, she has been loving and teaching them love; trying to help the church recover. I listened and learned about her church and its complex dynamics that afternoon and when – all too quickly – it was time for us to leave, we exchanged business cards. I looked at it, and it said: Valley Presbyterian Church of Imperial, Pennsylvania.

On the drive home that day, I had a conversation with a third woman: although not in person. I listened to a book on tape by Annie Dillard, a writer and member of a Presbyterian church. She talked about how she had taken part in the formation of a children's Sunday School class at her church, because there wasn't one for her son. She talked about how inadequate and unprepared she sometimes felt – as a parent and as a teacher – but how she came to realize that being a disciple of Christ boils down to seeking the guidance of the Spirit and doing what you do with genuine love.

These three brief encounters that I had with three different women that one day last week served as a reminder to me about how important our connection is with one another through Christ. It was, for me, a one-day lesson in what Jesus meant when he talks in John's gospel about our relationships being like that of branches with the vine. The three women named Mary were connected with each other because of their relationship with Christ: a relationship of common service, common caring, and shared gratitude. Their lives had become complete through their relationship with Christ and, by extension, those others who committed their lives and greatest treasures to Jesus.

At that dinner party in Bethany, Mary took an expensive jar of oil and, by pouring it on Jesus' feet, releases it so that its fragrance would permeate the air. Jesus takes no issue with the temporary nature of this gift. He declares it as appropriate for the moment, particularly in light of his impending death. He is gracious enough to receive the gift in the same spirit in which it was given: with gratitude.³

So many extravagant gifts are put into the air, where they will soon evaporate. A choir works to prepare an intricate anthem and in three minutes, it is gone. A teacher prepares a lesson and after the hour has ended, the class adjourns. Worshipers purchase dozens of Easter flowers to adorn the sanctuary and after service has ended, the space is stripped clean.

³ Willaim Carter in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

Throughout this Gospel of John, Jesus has been acting extravagantly, seemingly with no regard for permanence. At a wedding banquet, he changes a hundred and fifty gallons of water into wine. On a hillside, he transforms one boy's modest lunch into a meal for five-thousand. On the lake, he directs his disciples to drop their nets and they haul in a catch of a hundred and fifty-three fish.

Much of modern religion – like modern society – focuses only on what is useful, practical and cost-effective. We become cautious when resources appear slim. But, as John's Gospel reminds us, Jesus is the one through whom everything was made. There is abundance wherever he is present.

In the very next chapter of John, when Jesus gathers with his disciples for their final meal together, we will not find Jesus – as in the other Gospels – breaking the bread and passing around the cup. Instead, he takes off his robe and grabs a towel and bends down to wash the feet of his disciples. Peter protests, arguing that they should change places, so that Jesus' own feet could be washed. Jesus says no; and after having heard again this story of Mary, now I think I understand why. Maybe, under the dust on his feet, the scent of Mary's perfume still lingers along with the memory of the extravagant gift that she gave him. Maybe the gift that she gave him was not so temporary after all, but was instead as timeless as it was priceless.

When are those moments in our lives as disciples when a gesture of love and generosity transforms a situation, when a generous spirit offers forgiveness and healing, when a spirit of kindness offers healing and hope and speaks words of encouragement? This woman, Mary, even in the face of criticism, held nothing back; not even the most expensive gift she could give and not the gift of her own breaking heart. This woman, so full of love, is our teacher for today. She helps us to recognize who Jesus is, and who we are called to be as his faithful followers.

Judas, on the other hand, helps us to see who we are capable of being when we do not recognize gifts as being freely given; or when we discount the lasting nature of those priceless gifts we have to offer. "Are you able?" the old gospel song asks, are you able to remember that your feet have already been anointed, and then to grab a towel and share the gift of your giving to others? AMEN.