



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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What Not to Postpone

John 12:1-8 & Isaiah 43:16-21
A sermon by William M. Klein

7 April 2019

In our reading from Isaiah, the Israelites are invited not to cling so tenaciously to the past. Instead, they are to see how God is available to them in the present. This passage was probably written in the latter half of the 6th-century BC, when the Jewish community was fragmented and under great stress, having been conquered by the Babylonian armies. It must have been tempting for the people to long for the glories of the past, rather than deal with their present situation...surely an ever-present temptation, I'd say.

Isaiah's words remind them the Spirit of God is still present with them, and is about to deliver them from their wilderness experience in Babylon.

16 Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 20 The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. (Is. 43:16-21 NRSV)

In our gospel lesson, we witness a tender moment in which Mary anoints Jesus feet and then wipes them with her hair. Judas (the apparent treasurer for the disciples) scolds Mary for being so wasteful. Jesus comes to her aid by rebuking Judas.

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (Jn. 12:1-8 NRSV)

1

In order to appreciate what is going on in this passage, either you have to be able to read between the lines – or you have to have known events that led up to this dinner party in Bethany.

Chapter 11 of John described the death of Jesus' good friend Lazarus. Mary and Martha had sent a note telling Jesus their brother Lazarus was dying, asking Jesus to hurry

to them, confident he could heal Lazarus. But Jesus delayed in going to them – so that by the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days...which was a formulaic way of saying Lazarus was dead as a doornail. After Jesus wept in front of his friend's tomb, he then shouted "Lazarus, come out!" and the dead and decaying man came stumbling out of his tomb wrapped in bands of grave clothes.

For many who were within the highest ranks of religious leadership, this was the last straw. The chief priests and a number of the Pharisees called a meeting in Jerusalem – not just to talk about Jesus' being a threat to their understanding of the faith...but about how to put the meddlesome, backwater messiah to death. Word of their intention spread quickly so that Jesus could no longer walk freely within the Jewish community.

2

A week or so later, Jesus was back in Bethany – located only a few miles from Jerusalem, with the chief priests hot on his trail. Jesus was back in Bethany to visit his friends – Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Fully aware Jesus was at the top of the "most wanted" list with the religious right,¹ his three dear friends nonetheless quickly organized a dinner party in his honor.

I think it is interesting to note that the word used for "dinner" is used only twice in John's gospel account. Can you guess where the word "dinner" appears again? To describe the "Last Supper."²

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor portrays what the kitchen scene may have looked like...

So they took Jesus in and cared for him, shutting the world out for this one night at least. They made him supper, all of them chopping up things for the stew... Martha was in charge, of course. The others did what she told them to do. Lazarus, still clumsy from his four days in the tomb, handled the paring knife like a tree saw and stared at the potato in his hand as if he had never seen one before. Martha noticed and gave him a wooden spoon instead. His job was to stir when she said stir.³

When the meal was ready, Martha served, while Lazarus reclined with the other men at table with Jesus. We don't know who else was on the guest list. While Martha was busy serving and the men ate, Mary knelt down and anointed Jesus' feet with a pound of costly perfume.

Such a quantity of perfume was very expensive. Judas said it could have been sold for three hundred denarii. That would have been enough money to support a day laborer and his family for an entire year. And Mary simply poured the whole jar on Jesus' feet. Such an extravagant amount of ointment reminds us of the vast quantity of wine created by Jesus at another party at the wedding in Cana.⁴

Why did she pour the ointment on his feet? Why not his head? In that culture, the head was where people wore perfume at dinner parties and kings were anointed at their coronations. But she poured the ointment on Jesus' feet...which was where the preparation of a corpse for burial would start.⁵ Only dead men got their feet anointed – and Jesus knew it.⁶ She was preparing him for burial!

Mary then did an extraordinary and surprising thing. She unfastened her long hair and with it she wiped his feet. Jewish women kept their hair tied up in public. It was let

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down at night before going to bed or as a sign of mourning. Several days earlier when Mary was in mourning for her brother Lazarus, her hair was surely down.

The fact that she let her hair down in order to wipe Jesus' feet was an unashamed sign of her love for him. Because the verb John used to describe Mary wiping Jesus' feet was the same verb used to describe Jesus' wiping of his disciples' feet during the Last Supper – we realize Mary was doing for Jesus what he soon would do for his disciples and what he would tell them to do for others.⁷ And finally, by anointing his feet, Mary was acknowledging Jesus' impending burial and her grief soon to come.⁸ It seems she alone among the disciples understood Jesus' mission.

3

Judas, the disciple who tended the funds for the disciples – the disciple who would soon seek out the Jewish religious leaders who wanted Jesus killed – the disciple who would soon sell-out Jesus – this man scolded Mary for being so wasteful. Clearly the deep and prophetic symbolism of her act was lost on him...or, as events would unfold, maybe he understood all too well!

“That much ointment could have been sold and the funds used to help the poor,” he chided her. In the margin, John the gospel writer, turns to us and writes, “Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and often stole what was put into it.” It is curious to note that in a week's time the money Judas would receive from the chief priests for selling-out Jesus in fact would be used to help the poor.⁹

Jesus said to Judas, “Let her alone. Don't you see she is anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me.”¹⁰

It was the truth...but it surely was an odd thing for Jesus to say. What I mean is that if there ever was a defender of the poor it was Jesus. Nearly every word that came out of his mouth had to do with tending the poor, the oppressed, the widowed, and the nobodys. We misunderstand Jesus if we think he was saying we don't really need to make serving the poor our highest priority.

In this particular moment, though, at this table with friends, with his dear friend Mary ministering to him in so tender a way...he said, “Leave her be.” It was as if to say...

Use your heads. There is a time for everything. As Mary clearly understands, I will not be with you much longer. Let us take advantage of these precious moments we have. There is a time for busy-ness – a time for hard work – a time for serious reflection – and soon there will be a time for grieving. Today, though, around this table, with this gathering of friends, let us simply enjoy one another's company. You must grasp and treasure such moments...else you will miss the joy God intends.

What a remarkably grace-filled lesson. Christ encourages us to be discerning – to learn how to live broadly and richly. Life is precious and all-too fleeting...and so much we fill our days with is useless and unnecessary. Surely, we must take time for useful activity...but also for useful *inactivity*. We must seize opportunities as often as we can for sitting around the dinner table sharing the mirth of life – for being present in the moment – for expressing thanks to God for the sheer gift of one another.

How often do we postpone writing a letter that needs to be written...or put off an already overdue visit...or deferred time with friends or family because of a thousand things we have to get done? I must say I have never regretted taking the time. My regrets have to do with not.¹¹

Somehow Mary, Jesus' friend, knew she could not let the moment pass without bestowing upon Jesus a symbol of her extravagant love. Jesus understood and loved her for it. Because of her act of kindness toward him, Mary made the house at Bethany into a sanctuary. The outpouring of her love transformed that common meal into a Eucharist "showing forth the Lord's death until he comes."¹²

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The writer of John's gospel was convinced life has two levels of meaning – that which seems very ordinary...and that which is hidden among the ordinary that is also a signpost pointing to the eternal.

As we look at the text before us, preacher Tom Long wants us to have eyes wide-open to the two levels of meaning at work. Long writes...

John wants us to travel to this ordinary dinner party in Bethany – but not to miss the hint of resurrection we can see in Lazarus. He wants us to hear Judas's pious speech about caring for the poor – but also to discern in those words the treachery that lies in the human heart. He wants us to see Mary not just as hostess – but as prophet. He wants us to see her anointing Jesus not as a mere impulse of indulgence – but as a loving and costly act of worship. Jesus is not merely eating and drinking with friends – he will soon be the lamb at the Passover feast.¹³

And finally, John wants us to smell the fragrance of the perfume that fills the house. It is the unmistakable "scent of holiness." It is a scent that would remain in Mary's house in Bethany long after Jesus death – a scent that would remind her and Martha and Lazarus of that evening with their friend – a scent that would forever fill Mary's nose and her spirit.

Indeed, because of what she did, the whole world is filled with the bright fragrance of that perfume. Breathe deeply. You smell it, don't you?



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Endnotes:

¹ Taylor, Barbara B. 1997. *Bread of Angels*. Cambridge: Cowley Pub., 58.

² Van Harn, Roger E. 2001. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Tests – The Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 537. Citing John 13:2 – *deipnon*.

³ Taylor, 58.

⁴ See John 2:6.

⁵ Van Harn, 539.

⁶ Taylor, 61.

⁷ O'Day, Gail R. 1995. *John*. *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 701. Greek word is *ekmasso*.

⁸ Van Harn, 539.

⁹ See Matthew 27:3-10.

¹⁰ Peterson, Eugene H. 2002. The Message. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1944.

¹¹ Fifteen years ago a long-time member of this church died suddenly. Her family had all gathered over the weekend to mark her 80th year. The family took up several rows of pews here Sunday morning. The whole entourage then made its way to one of her favorite places, the Homestead, for lunch. During that meal, she became ill and died. To be sure it was a terrible shock to her family and friends. But I can tell you her family was and is so grateful they didn't use a thousand-and-one reasons to put this family gathering off.

¹² Long, Thomas G. 2001. "Gospel sound track," in *Christian Century*, March 14. Chicago: Christian Century Foundation, 11.

¹³ Long, 11.