

“IS THAT REALLY IN THE BIBLE?”

Psalm 126; John 12:1-8

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It was the hair that did it. Mary anointed Jesus' feet with a pound of ointment of pure nard, and then she wiped it up with her hair. And Judas was probably not the only person in the room outraged by her act. In the Jewish culture of the day, a woman simply did not unbind her hair in the presence of any man but her husband. A woman's hair was considered enticing, erotic, sexualonly to be revealed in marriage. For Mary to let down her hair, kneeling at Jesus' feet, in the midst of a dinner party in a room full of people, and then to wipe his feet with it was shocking, intimate, an act of self-giving utterly open and vulnerable, love that held nothing back.

I can assure you that Judas was not the only one appalled that night. And even we, 2000 years later, we are tempted to avert our eyes, to frown at Mary's display, or worse yet to spiritualize her love and grief until they are bloodless, passionless, suitable for polite conversation at dinner parties everywhere.

“Why was not this ointment (worth a year's wage for most folks) why was it not sold, and the proceeds given to the poor!” Judas bellowed. And we take a collective sigh of relief. Extravagant, intimate, sensual lovethat doesn't fit into our tidy paradigm of religion. We don't want to talk about that or even look there. But criticizing others for not doing their duty to otherswell, there's a religious sentiment to which we can all relate. The dinner party can continue its inoffensive progress.

I found myself wondering this week when Christianity became the religion of the well-behaved, a faith of “should” and “ought” rather than the exuberant outpouring of grateful love. I began to think about the aspects we have developed well in our religious life and those areas in which we are still theologically and spiritually immature. It is so easy for us to see Judas's point of view in this morning's story from John. A year's wages poured out on Jesus' feet and seeping into the dirt floor. Does that seem like a wise use of money to you? You can admit it! We get stuck there, just as Judas got stuck there, because even though we may not live it as fully as we should, if there's one thing that most of us in our tradition can articulate, it is our Christian responsibility to the poor, the vulnerable, the outcast. We know we should care about those who are marginalized. We know we should be about the work of doing justice and making peace. We may not know our Bibles well, but the parts we do know, the parts that resonate with us are Jesus' words and actions that call us to stand for and with those less fortunate than ourselves. And that's a good thing.

There are, however, other parts of Christian theology and spirituality, and at those parts we are less adept. I spent some time this week reading commentaries on this passage from John: from the standard scholarly sources to online blogs. It never ceases to amaze me how many sources there are on the internet for Bible commentary, and how the quality range of those sources goes from good to mediocre to just plain bad, but that's a subject for another day.

There is general agreement that Mary's extravagant gesture is an act of love for Jesus.

But when we start talking about love in the context of such a personal and intimate gesturewiping Jesus' feet with her unbound hairit's seemingly a difficult topic for us to address. I may be way off base here, but I

would contend this morning that as good as we may be at articulating a theology of social justice, we in our tradition, we are not so good at articulating a theology of Christian love. We're ok with love from a Christian context only at a distancetheoretical, intellectualized love—love as fellow feeling, love as duty. But when love becomes intimate, passionate, deeply personal, as in this morning's storywell then, it makes us nervous theologically. And I think there are two reasons for that. The first is that when we just hear the words “intimate,” “passionate,” “personal” connected with the word ‘love,’ the first connection we make is with sexual love, and if there is any area in the church's theology where it has done a bad job, it is in the area of sexuality. Greg Flint, the minister at the UCC church in Eugene, once summed up the message that most of us get from the church concerning our sexuality like this: “Sex is dirty, shameful, and inherently impure, and therefore should be saved for our marriage partner.” It's a horribly mixed message, but how many of you here grew up thinking that's pretty much what the church has to say? The creation story in Genesis tells us that God deliberately made us embodied, that our bodies are a gift of God. How many of you learned that in Sunday school? The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs is the only book of the Bible that never mentions God. It is a beautiful and explicit hymn to the goodness and power of sexual love, which is also interestingly a figure for the yearning of God for us and the soul's answering response to God. How often have you heard that said in church? I can tell you story after story of sexual love in the Bible that is portrayed as good and even redemptive. But that's not the message that by and large the church has preached, the message most of us have heard and internalized. The “why” and “how” of that is a subject for another day. But I think that the lack of a positive theology of sexuality has made us wary of the inherent goodness of any expression of passion and intimacy, and so of any religious expression of love that is feeling, personal, extravagant.

Martin Marty, the great church historian and sociologist, often referred to the mainline churches as “God's frozen people.” It's not just our theological suspicion of passion but also our cultural work ethic that leads us to a religion of “doing” rather than “feeling.” We are long on responsibilities and short on Hallelujahs. We place more faith in action than in prayer. We like our world logical, rational, and intellectually respectable, and have tried to recreate our faith in that image. Does this sound a lot like the Congregationalists you know and love? So doesn't it bother you that maybe we Congregationalists look more like Judas than like Mary in this morning's story from John? Judas, we know, was a man on a mission. He was a Zealot. He wanted social change. That was his agenda, and Jesus was only important to him as long as Jesus was useful in that mission.

Mary, in contrast, loved Jesus. She had seen first hand the extravagance of Jesus' love that did not discriminate by sex or class, Jesus' love that raised his friendher brother—Lazarus from the dead even though Jesus knew that to do so was to put his own life at risk. Mary's response to Jesus was to love with equal extravagance, to express that love concretely, personally, passionately. The challenge I think for us as we look at this story is not to avert our well-behaved eyes from her unseemly display or to minimize the self-giving commitment of her gesture. The challenge for us is to dare to move away from Judas who betrays Jesus still in our time with his tidy limitations and his seeming rationality. The challenge for us is to move towards opening ourselves, like Mary, to a faith more expressive, more feeling, a faith that gives not from duty, or from a sense of what is required of us, but from a deep well of thankfulness that the lord of all life loved us once beyond all that was reasonable and safe and tidy and respectable, and loves us still like that today. Thanks be to God. Amen.