

**“THERE’S THAT WOMAN AGAIN!”**

**Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; John 12:1-8**

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I have hair! You may have noticed in the last week or so. I am in the stage that my daughter Jessie, who has reason to know, calls “hamster hair.” It’s about as long as a hamster’s, and the same texture. After five months of hairlessness, I’m pretty excited about this new state. I find myself rubbing my hand over my head a lot, and looking in the mirror. These little baby hairs growing, they make me happy every time I see them, every time I touch them, a personal happiness, not huge in the great scheme of things, but for me an affirmation of newness, and hope, and the goodness of life.

I’ve thought a lot about my hair as I have been pondering all week this morning’s gospel lesson of Mary, sister of Lazarus, opening a jar of precious ointment, pouring it over Jesus’ feet, and wiping it up with her long, luxurious hair. Imagine having that much hair! That aside, this story of Mary and Jesus is so important. It holds a unique place in the gospels because of its subject matter. This story is one that speaks to us about personal joy, personal pleasure, personal life, and its place in Christian life. And it’s really the only place in the New Testament where the subject is broached so directly.

Backing up a moment, it’s interesting to me that an alternate version of this story of the anointing and the ointment appears in the gospels of both Matthew and Mark. But in those accounts, the action takes place at a public dinner party, an event at the house of Simon the Leper, a dinner party of sinners and other rabble meant as a political and theological statement, and it is a nameless woman, only known as one of the sinners with whom Jesus has eaten, who pours perfume onto Jesus’ feet. In that context, in that story, the text is one of religious devotion: it is about one sinner’s uninhibited joy in forgiveness and new life. But John, in his later gospel, changes the focus of this story completely when the site of his dinner party is not a public religious and political statement, but instead private: a personal affair at the home of Mary, Lazarus, and Martha. These three siblings are the only personal friends of Jesus mentioned in the gospels. And it’s important here to note that Jesus *has* these personal friends in the Bible. It was to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus’s house that Jesus would go when he wanted to get away from the crowds, away from his public persona. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is recorded as having told Mary at a different dinner party that she was welcome to listen at his feet with the men, instead of working in the kitchen. Earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus leaves his ministry and comes to Bethany, having heard of the death of Lazarus. When he encounters Mary weeping for her brother, he himself weeps. And then, of course, he raises Lazarus from the dead. This woman, Mary, unlike the nameless sinner of Matthew and Mark, the Mary of this story deeply loved the man Jesus, loved him not as messiah or rabbi or savior or leader of a movement, but as her friend, her champion, as the one who gave her back her beloved brother. Of course Mary

supported Jesus' ministry. How could she be his friend otherwise? But the public Jesus was the smallest part of who this man was to her. Mary was one of the few privileged to know the private Jesus and she loved that private Jesus; and in what is without a doubt the most sensual if not the most sexual story in the Bible, in a moment of overflowing devotion, she took what was probably her most valuable possession, this jar of costly nard, and she poured it over his feet, and then she knelt before him, her beloved friend, and she wiped his feet with her hair. All of her joy, all her thankfulness, her love, her wanting: everything in her heart was exposed in that startling moment, wet hair slipping over Jesus' feet and perfumed ointment soaking into dirt floor.

We almost want to look away from this text, embarrassed, maybe even outraged because of its intimacy. Judas, we hear, was outraged by Mary's gesture, although I have to tell you, I don't believe that he was outraged because he was a thief and wanted to steal the ointment. I will bet you all my theological credit that it's a late addition, not part of the original story. Judas works in this story as a foil, as Mary's direct opposite. To Judas, a Zealot, only the public Jesus was important. Judas ran with Jesus because of Jesus' message and because of the crowds that Jesus drew. Judas was wedded to a movement, to his political and social agenda. He wanted to start an uprising of the people to overthrow the hated Romans. And that desire was all Judas was, all that he had. There was no place in Judas's life for personal relationships and other "distractions."

"Why was this not sold and the money given to the poor?" he thundered. Ironically, in the story, it is Judas who is poor, poor in heart. He cannot see the exquisite gift before his eyes. He cannot rejoice in a moment of private joy. And ultimately he betrayed Jesus, not because Judas was a thief, but because Jesus' humanity, his humility, his disdain for conventional power baffled, confused, and ultimately alienated Judas. He was, in fact, Mary's polar opposite.

When Judas tries to humiliate and discredit Mary, Jesus' response is, "Leave her be. The poor you always have with you. You will not always have me." Much has been made over time about this text: "the poor you always have with you." Jesus' words here are not meant to be a deterrent to the work of social justice, that we should leave the poor as they are; nor are they meant as a fatalistic statement about the state of the world. In the larger context of the story, the words tell us that the work of ministry is always before us. Given our humanity, there will forever be something more to do to feed the poor, heal the sick, comfort the afflicted, or save our planet. And even though all this important work is always going to be there for us, still as we pursue these ends, we must not forget that they are not the be all and end all of life. Life is the end of life. Life is God's gift to us and we are to work at it, yes, but we are also commanded in it to find joy and delight, and friendship and goodness. We are made by God to care for people half a world away, but also to celebrate the steady strength of long love and the burn of new love; to be rendered speechless by the smell of our children's necks, and the fiery beauty of the ocean at sunset. We are meant, even as we follow a passion for justice, to laugh at dinner parties with our friends, to revel in hamster hair, to weep for sweetness past, and every now and again, to take the risk of embarrassing ourselves and maybe others with extravagant gestures of love. Life is for

our grabbing hold of every tender, and foolish, and beautiful moment and holding close its transient gift.

Friday night I was watching television, watching an interview with Jane Goodall on *Bill Moyers' Journal*. Did any of the rest of you see it? Have you seen Jane Goodall, heard her speak? She's a 75-year-old woman who has spent 50 years studying chimpanzees while working for environmental sustainability, youth opportunity and education, and economic development all over Africa. All these are interconnected in her life and work. She pours her heart into the battle for endangered species around the globe, traveling an average of 300 days a year, and she admits that the work is often slow, frustrating, and at times fruitless. However, I have never seen a woman with a more joyful countenance, with more stories of hope and brilliant moments of life savored. I don't know Goodall's religious orientation, but I do know that she understands what it is to grab hold of life—all of it: the work and the joy. On the television, I saw her hold a single condor feather—a huge long feather—condors being an endangered species making a return. She held this feather with a delight and reverence that was something to behold. I think she would have been completely at home, a welcome guest at a dinner party with Jesus and Mary and Lazarus and Martha. So we need to ask ourselves: do we belong at that party?

It is so easy to lose our perspective, to lose our very selves in the work to be done, in the challenges of our lives, in the huge complex issues we face as a country and as a global community. We bury ourselves in work, and seriousness, and mission, and we forget to look up and look around, to embrace all that is sweet in life and let it feed our spirits. Thank God that every three years, Mary, sister of Lazarus, Mary, devoted friend of Jesus, comes round in our lectionary again. She brings us up short, shocks us with her extravagance, but most importantly, she reminds us to find our balance, to take hold of the gift of our lives and never let it go. Thanks be to God. Amen.