

What was Mary Doing and How shall we Follow?

Rev. Jonathan Morgan

First Congregational United Church of Christ

John 12:1-11

March 13, 2016

Prayer

Extravagant God, lavishing your love on our poverty of heart: inspire us to give with generosity, to love life so that we may find it again, guide us to reach out to all of your children with the bounty of your grace, and thus the world will be filled with the fragrance of your love. Amen.

Sermon

Feet are curious things aren't they? Hard for us to see and even harder to embrace. The head, the hands, and even the hidden heart are much easier to acknowledge and hold. Somehow the lowly feet occupy a place reserved for things in life we wish to hide out of a sense of embarrassment... why is that?

I remember telling a group of adults at the start of a mission trip that I hoped to conclude our time together, not with the usual bread and cup shared in the sacrament of communion, but with the ancient Christian ritual of water and basin and caring hands. So, with great enthusiasm I shared how meaningful the act of foot washing could be through personal experiences when I felt the touch of the Spirit in the warm waters of God's love. I promised that their hearts would be forever changed when they encountered what the disciples experienced when Jesus knelt before them to wash their feet.

I was so looking forward to sharing this beautiful ritual with them.

As you may have guessed, that mission trip ended with Bread and Cup and the tranquil comfort of Holy Communion! Turns out that while I was describing scenes of tenderness and care to the group, those faithful church folk who sat stoically in front of me were strongly proclaiming in the recesses of their minds, "Wash my feet? Over my dead body!!"

I determined after the protests became more vocal and unceasing that such a ritual would lose most of its impact if we had to resort to duct tape in order to force reluctant feet into the warm waters of God's love. Too bad really! I have to say the Communion bread didn't quite satisfy my spiritual hunger that time because of my disappointment.

Why do we struggle so with this timeless ritual... is it our feet? Or is it really the intimacy of touch and care and honoring and comfort that we find ourselves struggling? Maybe that is why reading this morning's Gospel passage causes some feelings of discomfort as we imagine the scene so vividly described by John.

Let me try to unpack the meaning of this moving passage by first setting the context. We know that a few days earlier, Jesus had just raised his friend Lazarus from the confines of death in response to the pleading of his friends, Mary and Martha, who were desperate for his help. Jesus responded in miraculous fashion, thus raising the stakes of his ministry. Now the authorities, people of power with much to lose, were on full alert and just waiting for their chance to be rid of this rabble-rouser. Jesus went from being a religious curiosity to a credible threat to peace and order after the word about Lazarus made its way around the gathering crowds in Jerusalem. So, when Jesus arrived at their door he knew that his days on this earth were numbered.

We know from the text that after initial greetings, Martha goes to work immediately making sure the guests are well cared for, as was her way. No doubt everyone is aware of the growing threat to Jesus' life and

that he seemed to be walking straight into a trap. Did he show the strain, I wonder? At supper we can imagine the guests and host are doing their best to say what they hope while hiding what they feel.

You might have memories of such meals. When the atmosphere was thick with tension and no one wanted to be the first to mention the obvious. Everyone hoping to just get through the meal without the harsh realities of life encroaching too much on the fun and festivities.

Such was the desire of that party long ago, no doubt. And then, Mary breaks the spell, usually the case when the young and pure of heart are present.

Without saying a word, she kneels at Jesus' feet and offers a sign of her love and devotion. As her astonished brother looks on and in the presence of the startled disciples, Mary does four remarkable things.

First, she lets her hair down in a room full of men, which feels innocent enough today but in that day an honorable woman would not have done.

Then she pours Nard on Jesus' feet. Nard is a type of perfume used on the bodies of the dead, and the smell fills the room with its minty scent. Again, something never done, maybe anointing the head of a king—but never the feet of the living.

Next, she touches Jesus —also not acceptable between non-relations, not even among friends. Finally, with her hair, she wipes the excess perfume away—totally inexplicable!

What was Mary thinking? A question that was no doubt asked that day and has echoed through the ages. Was she mad? Or merely madly in love.

“Now it might be easy to confuse this account with three others in the Bible—one each from Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the first two, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' head, at the house of Simon the Leper, during the last week of his life. In the third story, the scene happens at Simon the Pharisee's house, much earlier in Jesus' ministry. There Jesus is eating supper when a woman of nefarious reputation slips into the room and stands weeping over his feet, then drops to the ground to cover them with kisses before rubbing them with oil of myrrh.” Barbara Brown Taylor

All curious accounts and rich with their own meaning. Only in John's version of the story does the woman have a name, Mary, and a relationship with Jesus—not a stranger, not a notorious sinner, but his long-time friend—which makes her act all the more intimate...and unsettling to us, I think.

He knows she loves him. He loves her too. So, why this public demonstration? Her extravagant, excessive act of devotion feels, to the gathered, over the top, as Judas is quick to point out.

What was Mary thinking?

Well, this act by Mary was more than a sign of devotion of a dear friend. It was a prophetic act by someone who could no longer ignore the truth that one day soon her beloved Jesus would be taken away... with the intention of making him disappear forever. Jesus knew this...

"Leave her alone," he says. "She kept it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" —which is about as odd a thing for him to say as what Mary did. Here is the champion of the poor, always putting their needs ahead of his, suddenly reversing course.

"Leave her alone. Leave me alone. Just this once, let her look after me, because my time is running out." Barbara Brown Taylor

In the room where Lazarus was now very much alive, Mary was preparing Jesus for his own death and in one final extravagant act of love and devotion she reflected and foretold of the even greater act of sacrifice and love that would soon be shown by Jesus.

As the poet writes:

"The precious substance will not be saved.

It will be opened, offered and used, at great price.

It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop."

Before that happens, Jesus will gather his friends together one last time. At another banquet, around another supper table, with most of the same people present, Jesus will tie a towel around his waist, and wash his disciples' feet. Then he will give them a new commandment: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

How many of them would remember Mary's extravagant act of devotion when Jesus washed their feet on that last night in the darkened room?

How many of us will remember that act of extravagant love when we are faced with a choice of ignoring what is real and hard to do...or something that is lasting and beautiful and inexplicable given the circumstances.

How many of us will remember this scene of devotion when we gather together on Maundy Thursday? The brave and the curious, to wash one another's feet in the sacred company of our church family and feel the touch of God's grace move through our embarrassment and reach the place of grace and blessedness.

How many of us will feel compelled to echo the words of the disciple who said, please let me wash your feet, because we find it hard to allow the soothing touch of another. "No, it is you who needs to feel God's care right now."

What was Mary thinking?

That we have such a God as this, one who kneels at our ordinary feet and offers a love of such extravagance that we can barely stand it and can hardly believe it is deserved.

Will you pray with me? Dear one, as we walk through this most holy of days, help us to live into such scenes of devotion. Help us to offer to others the extravagant love of your grace especially when they can barely stand it nor hardly believe themselves deserving. Let us do this in remembrance and love for the one whose love and life was poured out for us. Amen.

John 12:1-11

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. ⁴But 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.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”