

The Outrageous Anointing

John 12:1-8

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The story of the anointing woman is a well-known and well-cherished one and probably was at the time that the Gospel of John was written as well. It is dear to my heart because it illuminates two of the biblical elements that fascinate me most: Jesus' relationship with the women of the New Testament, and the teaching that Jesus tried so hard to convey to his uncomprehending disciples - the teaching of unconditional, extravagant love.

The story of the anointing woman occurs, in differing versions, in all four gospels, which is very unusual for any of the New Testament stories. In every version it is an outrageous act, for differing reasons. In only one of the four stories, in the Gospel of Luke, the anointing woman is a sinner. And so in that version it is the fact of Jesus receiving and touching a "woman of the city- a sinner," that shocks the on-lookers. As his host testily says, "If this man were a prophet he would know who and what this woman is." And no first century woman could let down her hair in front of anyone besides her husband, without breaking a serious taboo.

But in the story in John that we read today and in Matthew and Mark, it is the extravagant waste of the very precious oil that shocks the bystanders. It was then and is now an utterly counter-cultural act. Love without counting the cost.

It is Mary of Bethany who perpetrates this scandal in our story of today, and this is the only anointing story in the four gospels where the woman is named. This is the second scandalous act that Mary of Bethany has committed with Jesus of Nazareth. Earlier, as Jesus sat and taught his male disciples, Mary chose to sit at his feet as well, breaking the taboo of women studying with a rabbi. Even her sister is scandalized and admonishes Jesus to remind Mary of her place. But as in the anointing story, Jesus defends Mary and asserts that she has taken the "better part."

To pour such extravagant value at the feet of anyone who is not yourself or in your immediate family is presently as foreign to us now as it was then. However, the value that the nard was reported to have in our Gospel story may have been in line with so many symbolically inflated figures in the bible- Noah was over 800 years old, and by today's standards, the story of today describes Mary of Bethany pouring \$40,000 worth of perfume on Jesus' feet.

If this really happened before your eyes, you might say exactly what Judas did- why waste this great value on a mere gesture? Why not use the money for the

poor? Our passage of today hastens to explain that, although Judas reaction would have mirrored our own, it was not because he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief.

Peter had much the same reaction as Judas did when Jesus told him that he wanted to wash Peter's feet. "Lord, you will never wash my feet!" Peter sputtered. He was appalled at the seemingly meaningless wasteful extravagance in the gesture of a master washing the feet of his student. Washing the feet of a guest was considered a chore of such low status that only a slave, and a non-Jewish slave at that, would be expected to serve in this way. But Peter missed the point, just as Judas missed the point, just as we all so often miss the point. The point was unconditional, abundant, redeeming, limitless, utterly unselfish love.

The Gospel of John is made up of two halves- the Book of Signs, and the Book of Glory. The very first sign was presided over by another Mary- Mary of Nazareth- at the Wedding of Cana. And the very last sign is performed by Mary of Bethany. At the wedding of Cana there is another expression of almost unimaginable extravagance; the astonishing quantity of very fine wine provided by Jesus. His ministry is sandwiched in between two acts of great, extravagant generosity, both initiated by women. And the anointing story falls just before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and his special instructions to his disciples at the last supper to "love one another" (John 13:34). It seems clear that Mary of Bethany's act anticipates his commandment.

There are many examples of Jesus performing miracles of unimaginable abundance: The feeding of the multitudes (also one of the rare stories that occur in all four gospels) the massive catch of fish that Simon and his fellow fishermen harvest, and his instruction to forgive your brother not seven times but seventy times seven times ". And there are also many stories of Jesus breaking taboos in the interest of compassion: healing on the Sabbath, allowing the touch of a bleeding woman, speaking with, healing and raising up women of the despised races of the Canaanites and the Samaritan, and, of course dining with tax collectors and sinners.

But in the story of Mary of Bethany, we have someone other than Jesus actually performing a courageous, taboo-breaking act of tremendous generosity. We are shown that one doesn't have to be Jesus of Nazareth, one doesn't have to have miraculous powers to emulate the kind of unconditional and almost limitless love that Jesus models. We can all find comfort in the fact that it was humble, human Mary of Bethany who anointed the Anointed One. Anyone can identify with her. She ducked out of doing the dishes so she could do something more fun- study at the feet of Jesus. She yelled at Jesus for being late immediately prior to his miracle of raising her brother from the dead.

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus defends the anointing woman from the scolding disciples saying, "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." Ironically, in these two Gospels, she is never named. And sadly, for the most part, it is Luke's sinful woman of the city that has traditionally remained as a composite portrait of her. She has often been inaccurately identified as Mary Magdalene, although nowhere in the Gospels is it written that Mary of Magdalene was any kind of sinner. But this sermon today and so many throughout the centuries have fulfilled the prophecy that she will be remembered. And Jesus' words hold more importance than can be ascribed to a simple act of extravagance. It is the anointing of the Anointed One. It is the good news- the news that we can allow the Grace to rain from us for a change; we can give something without calculating the cost.

In our Old Testament reading, God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah. God says,

Do not remember the former things,
Or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing
Now it springs forth do you not perceive it?

Like the Old Testament God of Isaiah, Mary of Bethany, and Jesus of Nazareth, were trying a new thing. As it sprang forth, like that flood of fragrant oil, like that extravagant gesture of love that Jesus presented to the uncomprehending disciples, a new idea came into being, a new life and a new hope, not based on market forces, not based on self-preservation, but based on unlimited love.

There was an anointing woman in one story of the Buddhist tradition as well. After his wanderings, as the Buddha had tried everything to reach enlightenment, he was at the end of a long fast, and he decided it was better to live than to die. A young and beautiful woman knelt at his feet and offered him a bowl of rice milk. Its sweetness and abundance was a sharp contrast to his previous regiment of 7 grains of rice per day. The rice milk was not only deliciously sweet, but also served in a solid golden bowl, a bowl that the Buddha tossed into the river afterwards. The extravagant gift gave the Buddha enough strength to go on with his journey, to his Jerusalem and his glorification. He had the strength to start his famous vigil beneath the Bodhi tree, his journey to enlightenment. Perhaps Jesus experienced something of that feeling of sweetness, of great generosity after the leanness and danger of his ministry before this abundant anointing, the anointing that would signal the end of his ministry. Perhaps it was a reminder of the abundance of God, that he tried so

hard to model all his life. And it is the Christian Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hahn who best describes for me this abundance that we are all gifted with: He reminds us that:

The winds of grace are always blowing- we have only to put up our sails.

Jesus calls us to mirror the anointing woman and give back in some small measure, the love that has been so extravagantly poured out for us. The never-ending raining down of Grace in our lives- Grace we did not earn, Grace we can't even conceive of, and grace that does not ever exist in terms of lack or cost, but only in glorious abundance.

Amen