

The Gift of Mary

Pastor Cynthia Lapp
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John 12:1-8
Isaiah 43.16-21
Psalm 126

Thank you Erica for giving us Mary's version of the events in her home that evening long ago. And thank you to the youth and children for helping us experience what it is like to have a smell permeate the whole room.

This story of the woman and the perfumed oil is so momentous that it is one of the stories of Jesus' ministry that makes it into all four gospels. Of course the gospel writers don't all agree on *who* the woman was that poured the costly perfume on Jesus feet or even if it was his *feet* (Matthew and Mark say she poured it on his head.)

The lesson of the story shifts as well, depending on who is telling the story. While Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus said the woman's action will always be remembered, Luke's lesson is that the woman is forgiven. And John just says that in pouring the oil on his feet the woman is preparing Jesus for his own burial. We might also notice that in John's version just five days later Jesus washes the disciples' feet. Just who is teaching whom here?

And for John there is no ambiguity about who the woman is; it is Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus.

At this dinner party each family member has a role to play. Martha serves the food, Lazarus is the engaging host and Mary performs this welcoming ritual. But this action of Mary's, pouring expensive oil all over Jesus feet and then wiping it off with her hair is not acceptable to those at the dinner. Mary is accused

of poor judgment by none other than the king of poor judgment himself, Judas. She is accused of wastefulness, of not planning properly, of not using her wealth appropriately. She probably was also accused of messing up the floor and ruining the whole party though those accusations got edited out.

The word that most often gets associated with Mary's act of love and devotion is extravagance. Last week we heard the story of the prodigal son who was wasteful and extravagantly spent his inheritance even before his father died. In desperation and defeat, the son crawls home and is surprised to be welcomed by his father who throws him an extravagant party. Hmm.

As a moderate middle-aged Mennonite, I find extravagance unfamiliar, perhaps even sinful. On the other hand, it makes me squirm just a bit to find myself identifying more with the older, goody-goody brother or with Judas than with Mary. What to do?

Three years ago in San Francisco, I met several of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Talk about extravagant. They describe themselves as a "leading-edge order of queer nuns." They are "*devoted* to community service, ministry and outreach to those on the edges and to *promoting* human rights, respect for diversity and spiritual enlightenment." Many Catholic nuns might fit this definition — if you define "queer" as odd or curious.

But these sisters are hardly Vatican approved. The Sisters challenge all the assumptions we have of nuns, of what it means to be holy. They are shockingly beautiful and clever in the ruckus they raise. They "use humor and irreverent wit to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain

the human spirit.” They believe that “all people have a right to express their unique joy and beauty.” (From the Web site www.thesisters.org)

I am no fashion queen, but I can’t begin to keep up with the Sisters. The jewelry, the face paint, the dresses, the names they choose when they join the order, their habits, their gauche taste — all over the top.

The joy and laughter, the outrageous creativity that the sisters live out as they live into who they are is almost more than I know what to do with. The Sisters call into question the strict boundaries we have put around what it means to be spiritual, what it means to act out, what it means to be a sister — biologically and religiously, the sacredness of sexuality. It is almost as outlandish as an unmarried Mary pouring a whole bottle of extremely expensive perfume all over the rabbi’s feet and then rubbing it in with her loose hair.

Mary, like the Sisters, is pushing all the boundaries — gender roles, sexual and family roles, religious and social constructs, economic common sense and probably a few others. She is doing the wrong thing. Jesus ought to recoil, be uncomfortable. He ought to know that Mary is out of line. But Jesus doesn’t tell her she is incorrect or even immoral.

Jesus knows Mary and loves her. They are friends and this is not the first time they have shared an intense moment. In the previous chapter of John, we read the story of the death of Mary’s brother, Lazarus. Martha is dispatched to bear the sad news to Jesus as he approaches on the road. Mary stays home with the other mourners.

Martha meets Jesus and they speak about death and resurrection. Then Martha runs home to get Mary believing that she too ought to talk with Jesus. Maybe understanding about resurrection will make her feel better; she won't be so incapacitated by her grief.

Hearing that Jesus is asking for her, Mary immediately gets up and goes to Jesus. When she reaches him, she falls at his feet. This time however it is not adoration that has her on her knees, but exhaustion and accusation. "If you had been here Lazarus wouldn't have died." Mary weeps. And in response Jesus weeps as well. Jesus and Mary share this very personal experience of grief.

So we know that this pre-Passover dinner is not their first intimate encounter. Perhaps this is why Jesus understands Mary and rebukes Judas. "Be quiet. Step back. Leave her alone." Against all odds, Jesus affirms Mary for her devotion and foresight in anointing his body in preparation for burial.

The other activities of this household — all the exquisite and tasty recipes that Martha made, the clothing she must have sewed, the way that Lazarus made everyone feel comfortable at the table, the stories that he told — all of these are forgotten. It is this bizarre, boundary-crossing, boundary-**breaking** act of Mary that has survived these many generations.

If this kind of extravagance, this boundary-challenging act by Mary makes us uncomfortable perhaps that is precisely why this story of Mary is included in the gospels. She made a lot of people uncomfortable and people were taken aback by Jesus compassionate response to her. We who like our moderation, our middle of the road safety, our bread buttered right side up, we are knocked

out of our comfortable chairs at the table. We who like predictability have to be caught off guard so that we can get the message.

But what is the message? That God is wasteful? That God wants us to pour our money onto people we love instead of helping the poor? That we need to be polite even when our guests do strange things?

What if one of the messages is that we are not to get caught up in the way the world measures “stuff?” Maybe what Mary brings is some balance to a gathering that dealt in scarcity. Mary is operating out of abundance. When we think that there is not enough to go around we need to be reminded how God operates. Remember all that wine at the wedding? Remember the living water? Remember all that food left over from two fish and five loaves? Witness the diversity and profusion of spring buds. Witness Mary pouring a whole year’s wages onto the feet of the rabbi she loves and learns from.

Sometimes it takes a random act of kindness to remind us that there is enough, that we too can make the choice to be extravagantly generous. Perhaps you read the story of Reed Sandridge this week in the *Washington Post*. Reed is a 36-year-old man who was laid off last fall from his job at a non-profit. His mother taught him that “when you are going through tough times, that’s when you most need to give back.” So on the third anniversary of her death, he began his “year of giving.” (**Washington Post**, Metro, March 19, 2010)

His goal is to give away \$10 every day for a year. That is \$3,650, hardly a year’s salary, though I imagine it is not tax deductible for those of us who care about such things. He is keeping track of the people he meets and asks them to

let him know what they are doing with their \$10. And of course he is recording all of this on a blog.

His hope is that his own kindness will inspire others to become more generous. From reading many of the stories and responses on his blog he is achieving that goal. (Though there were the two women he met in a bar who, after he gave them the \$10, went out for a smoke and he was left to pick up their tab.) (<http://yearofgiving.wordpress.com>)

Reed and Mary are two peas in a pod. They both give away what they probably ought to keep for themselves. The cautious side of me says that Reed ought to be more careful with his money since he is unemployed. My cynical side wonders if his beneficence is a ploy to get attention and somehow land a new job from his outlandish behavior and 15 minutes of fame.

And Mary? Was she really being altruistic? Maybe she was just playing her part in making the party successful. She showed her love **and** covered up a lingering odor from her brother's recent death.

But cynicism aside, we can't ignore the delight that this generous extravagance brings. Reed and Mary, and let's not forget the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, bring deep joy to themselves and to others as they share what they have. They give what they can, they give more than they should. They help us all see that we have more than we know. In their actions we catch a glimpse of the holy, of the kingdom of God among us.

Let's let their example help loosen us, help us **let go** of our ideas of not enough and hold out hope for abundance and joy, grace and compassion. We

might even try to be, as Erica said in her monologue, a bit impulsive and rebellious. God help us all.