

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

MARY'S WAY

Preached by The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards, Senior Assistant

March 21, 2010 The Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:1-8

In today's gospel we see Jesus at a unique moment. Tension over his ministry has grown, and just before the dinner party described in this passage from John we see Jesus raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. This is too much for the religious authorities to bear. Jesus' teachings, his healings, and his challenge to the establishment were controversial enough, but to raise someone from the dead is the last straw. And so a plot to kill Jesus begins to gain momentum. "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him," say the chief priests. He must be stopped.

It's also important to remember that, as the passage says, the dinner took place six days before the Passover, which means the night before Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. So this is the last glimpse we get of Jesus in private. After this, the events of Holy Week will begin to unfold and Jesus disappears from the realm of the private. Everything he will do that week will have a symbolic meaning, a public meaning. But on this last night with his closest friends, he is hidden from public view. And there's a reason for it. Something is going to happen that will shape what Jesus will do in the week to come.

As you know, the story of this dinner has become famous because of what Mary did.

Her piece of performance art, you might say. A lot of scholars say that she poured the pound of precious ointment on Jesus' feet because she was grateful to him for raising Lazarus. I imagine she was grateful, but I don't think this was about being polite. I think her action has a deeper meaning.

It's hard for us to grasp how scandalous, how weird, what Mary did really was. As modern people it would be easy for us to think of it as a poetic, perhaps even sentimental gesture on the part of an overly emotional woman. But that's not it at all.

A little background. First, remember that in the time of Jesus, a woman was forbidden to touch a man unrelated to her. Also, women wore their hair bound, always. Loose hair meant a loose woman, literally. And think for a minute about hair itself. A mother touches a child's hair, a man or woman touches the hair of a lover, but ordinarily we don't touch each other's hair. I might give you a hug or a kiss on the cheek, I might feel the deepest love for you as a friend, but I wouldn't touch your hair. There is something deeply private, deeply personal about hair.

Mary breaks right through these boundaries and without a word she pours a huge amount of scented oil over Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair. It is so over-the-top that the

gospel says that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. She has given him everything she has: her most precious possession, her purity within the law, her gratitude, her love, her sexuality, her reputation, her dignity. The air is drenched with the scent of all these beautiful things.

And this drives Judas crazy. It sets his teeth on edge. He is filled with righteous indignation - the Achilles' heel of the religious sensibility, the over-insistence on what is "right." He makes a politically correct comment about the poor. He wants what is normal, appropriate, proper, and correct. "Why wasn't this stuff sold for top dollar on e-bay and the money given to the poor?" You can't get purer than that. The gospel implies that he wanted the money for himself, but that parenthetical comment was probably inserted later to demonize Judas even more; there's no evidence Judas betrayed Jesus for the money. He probably betrayed Jesus because he couldn't control him. And so especially in this passage Judas puts words to our human desire to try to manage God. God is all well and good, the church is all well and good, but for heaven's sake let's keep God in his heaven where He won't mess around with our plans and challenge our values and make unpleasant comments about how we are living our lives. I'm convinced that that's the reason most people's visual image of God the Father is of a feeble old man, saying nothing, sitting on a throne far away - because there's something in us that wants him that way.

There's an Anglican writer named Monica Furlong who lives in England and one of the things she said that I'll never forget is this: "Whenever I find myself filled with righteous indignation about something, I stop. And I start questioning my own motives." I think what she's saying is that self-righteous indignation is often more about the desire to serve one's own ends or one's own self-image than it is to serve others. I think what she's saying is that what is normal, appropriate,

proper, and correct often diminishes life instead of furthering life. You often see that happening in a marriage. One or another of the persons, maybe both, get so wrapped up in how they think the other one should think, act, feel, and behave that they stop seeing the other person at all and make him or her into a kind of prop on their stage. We do this to our kids, too. We tell them who they are and what they need to achieve and we manage them to death and then wonder why they seem so sad and mad and lost.

Starting next Sunday, Palm Sunday, we will see everything normal, appropriate, proper, and correct blow up in our faces as Jesus walks toward death. Soon, we will know his presence only by his absence. During these last days of Lent, we might think about the way we have tried to manage God and the people in our lives, and loosen up the reins a bit. We can do this because today's gospel offers us a better way, Mary's way.

To understand that way, we need to think back to the other story about Mary, the one about the first dinner party where Jesus was a guest. Mary sits at Jesus' feet and Martha, Little Miss Correctness, is so ticked off that she is doing all the work in the kitchen that she blesses out Jesus for not taking her side. And Jesus says, "Mary is sitting at my feet. She has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her." And what has Mary received at the feet of Jesus? His wisdom. She has opened herself to God, and God gives her a great gift. God's word of love and freedom and life is poured into her.

Now, at this final dinner on the night before Palm Sunday, Mary gives back to Jesus. She doesn't anoint his feet because she's grateful about something that happened in the recent past. She does it because she's grateful for something that's going to happen in the near future - his death. Mary knows exactly what's going on. She knows what's going to happen. That's what Jesus means when he says, "She

bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” She knows Jesus is a dead man walking. Jesus knows he’s a dead man walking. The dinner is, in effect, the day of his burial. His private life is now over. What remains is for the world to see. He cannot manage it; he can only be faithful to it. And so Mary, with her perfume and her hair, prepares Jesus for what lies ahead. She pours the love of God which she has received onto his body. Her sacrifice helps makes his sacrifice possible. And so here John shows us an image of the deep union with God that Jesus has made possible for us.

As I was working on this sermon last night, I couldn’t help but think about the women of our parish and what it is like to be a woman in New Canaan. I haven’t been here long, but I can tell that there is much here in our culture that keeps us bound, just as Mary’s hair was supposed to be bound. The pressure to have a perfect family, to be perfect, to maintain the lifestyle and the appearances, to have your kids do well, to be thing and groomed and exercised and correct and young and never to look like you’re getting older. Never.

This is a recipe for losing yourself. This is a recipe for soul death. Because if you can’t let your hair down, if you are always running from who you really are to try to be who you think you’re supposed to be, then you’ll have nothing to give to God. You won’t be able to anoint the feet of Jesus. If you have no self, then it’s really hard to be in a relationship with anyone, never mind God. Your perfume stays in the bottle. Your hair remains bound. You don’t really touch anyone because you are self-contained. You might be safe, you might be proper and appropriate and gorgeous, but you’re not free and whole.

On the other hand, unbound women and unbound men have power. They have it because of the example Jesus gave us before he died. Because a few days after the dinner when Mary washed his feet with her hair,

Jesus does something very similar to the disciples. He washes their feet and dries them with his own hands. “Love one another as I have loved you,” he says. Once again, a meal. Bread, wine, water, hands, feet, a towel. Small things, humble things. And yet we can feel the earth turning on its axis. Mary has prepared Jesus for death. Jesus prepares the disciples for life. And the church is for life.

From that night on, we have known Jesus’ presence only by his absence. And so as the church we are his presence in the world. We are the perfume. We are the bread, the wine, the water. We are the hair and the hands. We are God’s word and God’s love. That’s where the life of a parish really starts. That’s where its heart is. Everything else flows from those things. Let’s pour it all out so that we help God sanctify this precious world that Jesus died to save.

Let’s let him go on like this, so everyone will believe in him.

Amen.