

The Gang's All Here  
A Sermon by Dr. William D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
March 21, 2010

New Testament Lesson: John 12:1-8

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> (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..) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

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The Sermon

Although what we believe – and how we express that belief – is incredibly important, it is also true that the ways we include little peculiarities into our forms of worship can unintentionally be hilarious.

For example, one Friday in Aberdeen in 2007, I had the privilege of designing the worship service for the Friday Lenten series. Although the service was at St. Andrews Episcopal Church, because this was an ecumenical service I selected a Lenten liturgy from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Common Worship*; a liturgy which, by the way, the Episcopal Priest and others reported they really liked.

I also suggested the hymns which we were to sing. Somehow, however, my selection for the final hymn didn't make it into the copy of the service I gave to the Episcopal Church secretary – who was also their organist. Accordingly, I was told just before the service that said secretary/organist had selected a hymn appropriate for the day. This was fine with me.

The service went well from my perspective, with the Episcopal Priest, Father Dale, serving as the Officiant for the liturgy. My homily on the story of the Prodigal also seemed to be well received. But then it came time for the final hymn. The hymn # that the organist had chosen was printed in the bulletin, but instead of beginning to play the hymn, the organist stepped to the front of the congregation and said, "I'm so embarrassed because the final hymn, which I chose, is not appropriate to sing today. It is not appropriate because it's filled with the "A" word, so instead we'll sing...."

Well, do you think I could sing the alternate hymn? Even though I was still standing at the pulpit so you'd think I'd at least pretend to be singing, all I could do was ponder what the "A" word was, and I wasn't coming up with anything that would likely be in an Episcopal hymn book.

Fortunately, I got to recess down the aisle with Father Dale, and before others arrived to greet us at the back I could ask him what the “A” word was. “**It’s Alleluia!**” he replied. “Episcopalians don’t sing songs with Alleluia in them during Lent.” He then grinned, and added, “I bet you were having fun thinking of what the “A” word might be.”

I agreed I was.

I guess I should not have been too surprised that the Episcopal church secretary, who was also their organist, should have made this faux pas, because you see not only was she married to a *Lutheran* pastor, she had also been Aberdeen First Presbyterian Church’s secretary prior to taking the secretarial job at the Episcopal church.

Well, just as a Presbyterian can get puzzled by – or lost in – the order of worship, or in the when to kneel and when to stand traditions in an Episcopal church, even when that congregation worships in the same community in which one lives and it is in a contemporary period in history, imagine how much we can misinterpret when trying to understand the nuances of the Holy Scriptures, that were written centuries ago in radically different cultures.

As in the story of the Prodigal last week, where the story of the Father’s behavior would have been viewed as so outrageous in Middle Eastern culture, so today’s story of Jesus’ dear friend Mary’s behavior takes on an entirely different light when viewed through the lens of the radically conservative Jewish social and religious mores of the first century.

In short, by her own day’s standards of appropriate behavior between an unmarried woman and an unrelated male, Mary was way out of line.

Think of it this way. Mary and Jesus were, indeed, dear friends, but even if they’d been married it would have been inappropriate for Mary to enter a circle of men lounging around a low table and touch the feet of any of the men present. Women in that culture didn’t touch the feet of *any* man except their husbands’.

And Mary not only touched Jesus’ feet, she broke open that bottle open that bottle of expensive perfume and poured it all over Jesus’ feet.

I can only imagine the eye-rolling her behavior brought, and what her apparently uptight sister Martha must have been thinking at the time.

But if her behavior to that point wasn’t sufficiently outrageous, Mary then unfastened her long hair (something women of that culture only did in private with their husbands) and used her hair to rub the perfume into his feet, and then dry them off.

Whoa! What was Mary thinking? Was she even thinking?

In another gospel, in another variation of an anointing story, it is a woman of ill repute who pours perfume on Jesus and lets down her hair.

That seems a bit more plausible, because in that story Jesus is dining in the home of a Pharisee, and he apparently doesn’t even know the woman.

However in John's Gospel, Mary is certainly not a woman of ill repute.

*An impulsive person, maybe.*

*Someone very unlike her sister, definitely.*

But not – so far as we are told in the Gospel stories about her -- anything other than a respectable unmarried woman living at home with her also unmarried sister and brother.

Further, this isn't a dinner in the home of a Pharisee – it is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus – behaving in a most unladylike manner in her own family home.

If hard-working Martha could be offended by her sister's actions of simply sitting at the feet of Jesus – and thus assuming the posture of a disciple – imagine her outrage at this episode.

*We are not told* in this story what Martha thought of Mary or, for that matter *whether Lazarus was appalled* by his sister's unthinkable actions.

*We are told* that Judas was incensed by the waste of an ointment that cost a year's wages. After all, we are told, Judas self-righteously said that it could be sold and given to the poor!

You don't have to turn Judas into a conniving thief to realize that *someone* at this dinner party would be thinking the same thing.

It's a conversation that takes place all the time in most congregations.

For example, Lutheran Minister Lynn Parsons tells of a parallel in a congregation he served some 30 years ago. The Rev. Parsons writes:

I was serving a Congregation that had a great worship area, but, to my surprise, they did not have regular donations of flowers for the Altar. A group of women who served on the Altar Guild, and several others thought it was a good idea to have regular delivery of flowers for Sunday worship. They had even planned to take the flowers to shut-ins after the service as a reminder of care and concern for these members.

Well, the ladies went to the local florist who gave them a wonderful price for the flowers. They had the issue put on the agenda of the Annual Meeting. They discussed their idea very clearly. Many were happy with the idea until, one older lady raised her hand, was recognized by the Chair, and asked if there were no more poor people in the world. Her thought was that the money would be better collected and sent to the poor.

The flowers withered when the congregation felt it to be more important to give to the poor. Even though the flower issue failed, no one ever brought up taking the weekly amount and sending it to the poor. To this day, the congregation seems to be poor stewards and flowerless.

By contrast, this story in John's Gospel goes to the heart of what it means to give extravagantly – indeed to give outrageously --to the cause of Christ; to the person of Christ; no matter whose tongues are going cluck cluck!

Ointment for Jesus' feet – certainly. That it is a Jewish woman shamelessly touching the feet of a Jewish man to whom she is not married – is not the point of the story.

Gender biases and sexual mores are not the issue here.

The issue is the proper posture of a disciple, and that is to be at the feet of the Messiah, assuming the posture of a servant.

That Mary's behavior is precisely on target for how followers of Christ should behave is made crystal clear when, just a few days after this episode in the Lazarus/Martha/Mary household, Jesus takes a basin and towel, and begins to wash the feet of his disciples, something that only a servant – and definitely not the Master – would do in that culture.

In this biblical story Mary reminds us that God, and God's Christ, doesn't get all hung up on what is culturally acceptable behavior. In his reply to Judas, and in defense of Mary, Jesus depicts her actions as a totally appropriate and appreciated anointing in anticipation of his pending death.

What some saw simply as shameful, Jesus saw as an act of true worship and true discipleship.

I titled this sermon, "The Gang's All Here," in recognition that in any congregation there will, hopefully, be the Mary's who help us loosen up and stop being so gosh-darned pious.

There will, hopefully, be the Marthas, who are willing to work behind the scenes so that others can enjoy themselves – but let's not forget to give them a "thank you" as well.

There will be the Judas' who may or may not have any ulterior motives for "calling the question" on how and why we are spending what we are spending.

There will, prayerfully, be the Lazarus' who have been "raised from the dead," by the Living Christ, and who have been willing to throw off the old grave clothes that were binding them and strangling them, and go from the death-befouled stench of a tomb, to the perfume-scented air of a house filled with love.

And there will be the unnamed and probably unrecognized guests in Christ's sanctuary, who simply want to luxuriate in the presence of the Mystery that we know as the Christ event.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. Thanks be to God!