



SERMONS THAT WORK

Monday in Holy Week

Leave Her Alone. She Is Telling the Truth.

[RCL] Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

In our Episcopal tradition, it was Palm Sunday yesterday. Jesus has entered Jerusalem. We are beginning Holy Week, and Jesus is walking closer and closer toward the cross.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is at Bethany, attending a dinner party hosted by Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead a few days earlier. This must be a big party to celebrate the miracle. Jesus must be treated like a king.

As usual, Lazarus' sister Martha is busy cooking dinner and serving the guests. Mary does something unlike her sister. Last time when they were hosting, Mary was sitting by Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching instead of helping Martha. That made Martha mad and she complained to Jesus. This time, Mary disappeared and then came back with "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" (John 12:3). This time, it is not Martha who complains, but Jesus' disciple, Judas. He complains that Mary is wasting the perfume, which could have been used for the poor.

Usually, an anointing would be on the head, but Mary anointed the feet of Jesus. If she anointed his head, that might really look like she was treating him like a king, since he raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. However, she anoints his feet! She then wipes his feet with her hair. What an unusual thing Mary has done!

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, a well-known preacher and Episcopal priest, says what Mary has done is a prophetic act. Mary is foretelling Jesus' death and his washing of the disciples' feet.

When feet are anointed, it usually happens when the person is dead. Jesus has been telling his disciples that he will suffer and die soon, but the disciples have been in denial. Jesus scolded Peter, even calling him "Satan," because he cared only for earthly and not heavenly things. Mary believes in Jesus and accepts his upcoming death. Mary does this to affirm the message that Jesus has been delivering. If you have been to a funeral home, you will notice it is often filled with the fragrance of flowers. This house must smell like that, a sign of Jesus' upcoming death.

In a few days, Jesus will have his last supper. Before the supper, he will wash his disciples' feet. This foot washing is the prelude of Jesus' new commandment to them, that they love one another as he has loved them. Mary is carrying out what Jesus will teach his disciples by washing his feet with perfume and her precious hair. She is both prophesying and being a good disciple, loving Jesus as he has loved her, and her brother, Lazarus, and her sister, Martha.

Mary is doing strange things, and so is Jesus. Jesus has been advocating for the poor and the oppressed. However, when Judas complains about the wasting of the expensive perfume, which could have been sold to benefit the poor, Jesus tells him to leave Mary alone. According to some scholars, three hundred denarii would have been about a year's wages for a regular worker in Jesus' time. That certainly is a lot of money. The Gospel tells us that Judas is a thief and will eventually betray Jesus, and he may not be sincerely concerned about helping the poor, but he does have a point; there are a lot of poor people around who need help—why not sell the perfume to help them instead of spending it on one person?

However, who is this one person? This person is Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the author describes the Christ as one who has entered the Holy Place to obtain eternal redemption, and who comes with his own blood through the eternal Spirit to purify “our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (Hebrews 9:12-14). That is what Jesus does. Jesus the Christ sheds his human blood on the cross but also sheds his metaphorical blood through the Holy Spirit to purify our conscience and to offer eternal redemption. Jesus' human death leads to his resurrection—and our resurrection.

On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we are invited “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.” “And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature,” we are reminded of our mortality by the ashes imposed on our foreheads (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 265).

We have been walking on this spiritual Lenten journey for more than five weeks and are now on the last leg. During this journey, we have been reminded of the temptation of Jesus, the foretelling of his passion, the cleansing of the temple as a house of worship, and the fact that a grain has to die to bear fruit. These messages all point to his upcoming death. The most important lesson is that God loves God's people, and Jesus becomes incarnate to redeem God's people, and Jesus' death will lead to his resurrection. If we follow the way of Jesus, we will have our conscience purified by the metaphorical blood of Jesus and lead to new life and eternal redemption.

That's why Jesus stops Judas from complaining about Mary's actions: so that she can continue the message of his upcoming death—an important message. His death is to carry out his mission on earth, so as to purify our conscience, so as to lead us to redemption. Three hundred denarii may be a lot of money, and helping the poor is important, and in a way, we do need money to help them. However, what is the

meaning of doing so? Doing it for the glory of being charitable, as dead work? Or for the sake of loving God and loving God's people? To love God and to love God's people is the reason for Jesus' death and leads to resurrection. What is three hundred denarii compared to Jesus' life?

Remember, we all face death once in baptism: "In [the water of Baptism] we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit" (BCP, p. 306). We have died with Jesus and accepted new life. Have we been carrying our own cross and following Jesus, so as to love others as God has loved us? Have we been living the way of life that Jesus wants us to live?

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Ada Wong Nagata** for Monday in Holy Week in 2018.*