



SERMONS THAT WORK

Monday in Holy Week

To the End and Beyond

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

We return, as we always do on Monday of Holy Week, to the little house in Bethany. Ears still ringing from the raucous crowds thronging the streets of Jerusalem yesterday on Palm Sunday, perhaps our own voices are hoarse from shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Our unspoken hope was that if we proclaimed it loudly enough, maybe this year we wouldn’t hear our own voices a scant week later shouting, “Crucify him!”

Jesus knows what is coming, and he comes here to the house in Bethany for strength. Perhaps we can do the same. But, as always with Jesus, and especially during Holy Week, there is a dose of keen insight awaiting us, insight about ourselves and our motives that we might have been happier without.

Jesus draws strength from his dearest friends: Martha with her untiring service, practical and steadfast, Mary with her extravagant devotion, intense and demonstrative, and Lazarus, who loves with neither deeds nor words, but his simple, quiet presence. Martha speaks with her hands, Mary speaks with her tears, and Lazarus speaks with a small smile and the love shining out of his eyes as he sits at table with Jesus for the last time. The goodbye, unspoken in any direct terms, vibrates in the room with palpable intensity.

Is Jesus going to come to your house tonight? Are you his trusted confidante, someone who loves him not for the miracles and the prophecies of his kingship but for himself? Are you his companion at meals uncounted? Have you shared table fellowship with him, times of laughter and feasting, over weeks and months and years of friendship? Has he raised *you* from the dead?

The questions keep coming from some hidden corner of our troubled spirits. Will you be able to comfort him with the evidence of your walking, talking, breathing self that he brought back from death like Lazarus? Can he count on your service like he can with Martha? Does he know you’ll do anything for him like Mary will? Can you show him with your life that resurrection is real? These are the questions that haunt us tonight.

These remarkable siblings that Jesus so cherished have much to teach us. But let’s focus for a moment on one perhaps overlooked detail that will keep us asking ourselves the hard questions, the questions that will

move Holy Week from being a mere dramatic spectacle to a life-changing valley of shadow and spiritual growth.

After Mary pours her perfume on Jesus' feet and Judas scolds her for it, Jesus says this: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Consider the implications of this statement. Mary, who loved Jesus, who found her life changed by his teaching and his healing presence, who knew she was his beloved friend, at some point went to the market and bought perfume to anoint Jesus' dead body. Have you ever thought about your best friend, a friend who is in very good health and doing great work in the world, at the peak of his strength and vibrancy, and then thought, "Well, I'd better go ahead and pick out what I'm going to wear to his funeral."?

Of course not. It's nonsensical. Or at least it seems to be. But it is actually a statement of profound loyalty and love that puts all Peter's blustering bravado and Judas' self-righteous moralizing to shame. First of all, Mary has heard Jesus say that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinners, killed, and on the third day rise again. And unlike the scribes and Pharisees, unlike even Jesus' chosen twelve, she believed him. She believed him, and rather than scolding him for it like Peter or hedging her bets for her future after Jesus like Judas, she quietly prepared for it.

What makes this act so selfless is that she did not try to dissuade him from going purposely to his death, nor did she try to influence the outside political situation in the world to prevent his arrest or conviction. This was where her Lord said he needed to go, and so she determined to go with him. Furthermore, she knew he would leave her behind, but rather than selfishly trying to stop it, she quietly, methodically prepared to continue loving and caring for him after he died.

She walked toward death herself in an incredibly selfless way, not a dramatic literal death, but the humble and exquisitely painful death of being the one left behind, the one still alive, the one abandoned to a bitter, living grief. She privately bought perfume for the day of his burial and stored it away until it would be needed. From extravagant, demonstrative Mary, this is a hidden and humble act of deep loyalty that would probably never be seen or known by anyone, even Jesus, because he would be dead. It is a reminder of the glory hidden away in the corners of other people in unexpected ways that we never see. It is a reminder of the glory hidden away in you.

But Mary didn't wait. She didn't wait until he died. She poured the perfume on his feet before he died at what was, for her and her siblings, their Last Supper with Jesus. Why? It takes what was already a beautiful act of devotion, her private resolution to accompany him to death and beyond, to the next level. First, she shows him while he is still alive that she accepts that he will die. She will not try to prevent him from doing what he is determined to do, and by anointing him for burial while he is alive, she is pledging herself to him and showing that she trusts him enough to let him die without protesting.

Second, she does this in her own home. She says yes to death in her own private space, the place where she has had the most precious moments of her life with Jesus. This house in Bethany is a symbol of her heart, and she opens herself to the death of Jesus here.

This farewell dinner is the Last Supper for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. This is the sacramental moment for them, of fellowship with death approaching, and Mary pours herself and her offering out upon Jesus. She allows herself to be broken open, shedding tears, wiping his feet with her hair, saying a wholehearted “yes” to how Jesus will allow himself to be broken for her. This is love and grief and loyalty and hope all bound up in one transcendent act.

So, have you purchased perfume for the day of Jesus’ burial? There is still time. It is a tremendous risk. It is a pledge to stay with Jesus to the end and beyond, to care for him when he can no longer care for himself, to say yes to his death, knowing it will mean your own death in a profound way.

But Jesus loves Mary so much for this simple act with its hidden depths of devotion. It strengthens him. It is a point of stability for him in a world rapidly flying apart, an act of steadfast and unbreakable loyalty among his friends who are running for the hills as he approaches the end.

The gospel says, “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” She breaks the bottle and the fragile, ethereal, enchanting smell transforms the house into holy space, where death and life and love are mingled inextricably. This is what happens in our hearts when we allow that last hope of running away from the truth to break within us, just like that bottle of perfume. The smallest of sounds, the smallest of moments, with the deepest of meanings.

So let us go within. Let us explore the hidden corners of our own hearts. Let us search our spirits and ask: will we buy perfume for the day of Jesus’ burial? No one will thank us for it. Judas will scold us for it, everyone else will simply think us dramatic and hysterical women. What a stupid and useless thing to do, they will all say.

But Jesus—Jesus will understand. And Jesus will cherish our gift of ourselves.

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