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Lent 5, Year C: John 12: 1-8 March 25, 2007

John 12:1-8

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

One of the pleasures of my life these days is watching movies with our daughter Hannah, who's 12 going on 13. Breakfast at Tiffany's, Titanic, The Queen. You could say these are all chick flicks, but all three of them are also about something precious that is lost—first love, great ship, great diamond necklace (Titanic), Princess Diana (The Queen), innocence, or end of an era (Breakfast at Tiffany's, The Queen, Titanic).



I think the movies are one of the rare places in our society where we're allowed to experience the power of symbolism. For example, in "The Queen," after Princess Diana's death, Queen Elizabeth is visited on the moors by a magnificent and elusive stag. The Queen gasps and says, "You are beautiful!" and shoos it away. Several scenes later, the stag is shot, and the Queen visits her neighbors' estate to see the stag...in a sense to pay her respects. The stag is too beautiful a creature to survive.

In our passage today from the Gospel of John, Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, expresses her deep love for Jesus by anointing his feet with a "costly" perfume. Mary, the faithful and thoughtful listener understands that Jesus will die soon. What a scene. John would make a good screenwriter.

We get to know Jesus in the gospels through stories, and through his interaction with an "ensemble cast" of characters in the stories. Like us, he is embedded in a community. In this episode, we have Jesus with Martha, Mary, Lazarus...and, of course, Judas. But let's leave Judas offstage for a few minutes.

This is the third “ensemble scene” we have of the friendship between Jesus, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. In the first dinner scene, in Luke, Martha, the busy sister, complains to Jesus that her sister Mary, is not pulling her weight in the kitchen because she sits at Jesus’ feet and listens. Jesus tells her that Mary is choosing the better part.

In the second “ensemble” scene, Jesus calls his friend, Lazarus, from the tomb after Martha has confronted him and asked him, “where have you been all this time?”

Here, in the third “ensemble” scene, it’s a week before Passover, about where we are today in terms of Palm Sunday, which comes right after this passage in John. Once again there’s a dinner party. Martha serves, and Mary takes her place at Jesus’ feet. Jesus knows he is going to die. Perhaps you could say that is the “elephant in the room.” Some of his followers understood and some didn’t. The tension is building. In the midst of the party, Mary leaves her seat, takes 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.”

To continue with the movie analogy, I’d like to stop “the film” for discussion here and go a bit deeper...

First, I think it’s important to note that this is not Mary Magdalene. There are many famous paintings that confuse the two. This is Mary, sister of Martha, friend of Jesus.

Second, washing the feet of guests was an expected act of hospitality in the ancient world. It was most often done by slaves or servants. Mary is doing a servant’s work, just as Jesus takes the part of a servant when he washes the feet of the disciples in the following chapter, at the Last Supper.

But this is no ordinary foot washing. Mary takes a “costly” perfume, and applies it to Jesus feet, using her hair. Even from 2,000 years distance, we feel ourselves pull back a little. It seems too personal. She expresses her respect and love for him through touch, through the primal sensory experience of fragrance. This is an extraordinarily intimate thing to do.

Especially in the context of Jesus’ Jewish culture. As in almost all of human history, this was a man’s world. Women were separate from men, and believed to be often unclean. Notice how John identifies the house as belonging to Lazarus. Women’s hair was a symbol of their sexuality, and had to be kept covered. Here, Mary’s hair tumbles down and she uses it to touch Jesus, a man. This is an extraordinarily intimate thing to do.

Mary’s anointing of Jesus feet has a sacramental feel to it. In fact, Jesus acknowledges that Mary is doing this for him as anointing for his burial — the last rites.

This is an act of worship. Like the scent of incense that lingers in the air after a high church service, John says that Mary’s gift of Nard filled the room so that everyone was included in the experience.

In seminary, we study the sacraments, their history, their meaning. My Liturgics professor at CDSP was in favor of “extravagant symbols” like total immersion baptism at the Easter Vigil. Anointing meant pouring, not dabbing, scented oil over the candidate’s head and smearing the sign of the cross on their forehead. Once, as I was sitting in the

front row, I became his demonstration model. Fortunately, he did the demonstration without the oil. He would like Mary's style. This is an extravagant symbol.

What is the purpose of this kind of thing? Is it necessary? Why do it?

Every Saturday I look forward to reading Peggy Noonan's "Declarations" column in the "Pursuits" section of the Wall Street Journal. In January she wrote a column called, "An Ode to Ceremony," that talked about how Gerald Ford's Presidential funeral at the National Cathedral unexpectedly touched thousands of people on a level deeper than they were used to. The ceremony, music and beauty brought them to tears. Why was it so moving? Why do we need ceremony? She writes: "*We do it to make the picture broader for a moment, and free ourselves of our cynicism. And we do it finally to enact what so many feel and rarely say, not only because it's corny but because if you mean it, it's beyond words.*"

"Corny", that's an interesting choice of words. Perhaps this is a good time to bring Judas back on stage. In a sense, Judas sees Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet as Corny. He asks "Why?" Judas is not equipped to understand love beyond words or its expression. Sure, John also says he's a thief, but mostly I think he is CYNICAL....

Judas focuses on the fact that the Nard is "costly." John makes a point to note that Mary anoints Jesus' feet with "costly" nard--which adds weight to its symbolism. To her, only something costly would fully express her love for Jesus. We can also look at it as honoring the costly price Jesus will pay.

How does Jesus react? He says to Judas, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Jesus once again says, in essence, that Mary has chosen the better part, rather than the busyness of Martha or the cynicism of Judas. Jesus accepts Mary's "over the top," gesture as an expression of love that is, as Peggy Noonan says, beyond words.

Love that is beyond words. The sacramental. Ceremony. Of course, we Episcopalians are good at this sort of thing. We're famous for a "good show" and people from the outside world drop in to sample it during Holy Week and Easter, especially.

But every Sunday we celebrate the Holy Eucharist together to "commune" to "be with" Christ and each other in a ceremony of feeding from "one bread and one cup." We do it very well.

What we don't do so well is communicate why we do it. It's difficult to talk about a love beyond words...because it is "beyond words." Maybe we're afraid that we look corny to the rather cynical world we live in that is used to experiencing symbolism only in the movies, distrusts it in everyday life and relegates ceremony to weddings, funerals and graduations.

Our reading from Isaiah today says, "I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" My prayer for you is that you may perceive the new things God is doing in your life, and in our life together as a community. This movement of God reaching out to us is, like the best movies, a love story. When we worship together and share the

sacraments, we are brought to a new place, beyond our cynicism. We are brought to Christ's feet, and often to tears... Help us to perceive God in our midst, and honor Him, like Mary does in our passage today, by giving the best of ourselves.

Together, here at Trinity, we are an ensemble cast with Christ acting out God's love beyond words. New things, good things, are happening among us. Lord, help us to share this sacramental love beyond words with others, out in the larger world. Amen.