

March 21, 2010
Lent V
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As is my own personal custom in looking at texts, I ask who shows up in the Gospel reading. The biggest cast of characters with the feeding of 5,000 men and unnumbered women and children also present. Today's has a goodly number of characters with names attached. Lazarus, Mary and Martha are on hand to host a little dinner party for Jesus. By inference, all the disciples are there, but most notably Judas. Jesus is there, too, plus, by mentioning it, we are conscious of the existence of the poor.

It would be easy to get caught up in who was who and what was what, because this story is just plain complicated. We have mention of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead. We know about the dust-up with Martha and Mary at one of Jesus' previous visits, you know the one, Martha does the dishes and Mary sits down. Now we have Martha serving dinner and Mary doing something extraordinary. That's what I want to focus on this morning, Mary's actions.

Mary approaches Jesus in a most amazing way throughout all of her history, mostly recorded in the Gospel of John. She sits at his feet and listens, she believes her brother would not have died if Jesus had been there and has the nerve to say so out loud. Now, with this lavish display of devotion she turns everyone's heads, lights up everyone's olfactory responses and creates nothing short of a socially-uncomfortable moment in her expenditure of something precious, outrageous and ludicrous, this anointing of feet with oil when everyone else thought water would do just fine, thank you very much.

Part of the interest in this Gospel is the extravagance, and part of it is everyone's reaction to it, including Jesus' reaction.

To top it off, we get more information that we want on who Judas is, what Judas does and what Judas says. He flippantly parrots back Jesus' words about caring for neighbor and sharing what you have with the poor. None of us believes it, in part because the authors of this Gospel make SURE you know who he is and what he has been doing.

And now we are confronted with Jesus' prior summation of the commandments, which are 1. Love God and 2. Love neighbor with the same devotion as you love yourself.

Today we see an extravagant example of the first: Mary's absolute devotion to him, giving it all that she has in this expensive perfume for that less memorable part, the feet. Feet had been in sandals, feet had walked to Bethany, feet that are now on a path to Jerusalem, as Bethany is only a mile and a half from this holy city.

Gospels are here to turn things upside down and Mary has done this. If that is the way Gospel operates, if that is the way Good News is given and received, we need to take a long hard look at ourselves and how we do church. I think the world needs us to turn it upside down and really change how we are the body of Christ in the world. Otherwise, there will be no one inside these walls to preach and no one who will listen. If actions speak louder than words, have we here entombed ourselves in words and walls and our actions fallen into the category of self-serving. Is it more important for the word to get out or to protect the word for some better time?

If we are serious about Lent, Holy Week and stories of death and resurrection, how serious are we about living it out in our own selves and in the work of the church?

But wouldn't that be the death of the church, we cry. God would not let that happen.

Let me say that again, "Are we talking about the death of the church here? God would not let that happen!" The readings and the lessons of the next two weeks restate that God will do what God wants to do, painful as the death of a son would be, to reach as many as possible with the Good News.

Oil for anointing, bread for the journey, living water on thirsty days, wine to make our heart glad, singing and prayers to reflect our joy, these are the tools of the trade for spreading the love of God. The future will deserve and require our absolute devotion to God for the building of the Kingdom. This kind of extravagance is ours to claim.