

“What’s it to You?”

Around here we tend to like music and laughter in worship. If we have laughed with recognition—preferably at ourselves—and sung or heard music that lifts us out of ourselves for a moment or two, we feel as though we’ve really been to church. I have a theory about all of that. What music and laughter have in common is that they allow us to be a little bit out of control; and we need that to really worship.

Maybe it’s because a lot of us are somewhat suspicious of organized religion; maybe we’re leery of religious expression that seems to play on people’s emotions, to keep tromping on the guilt button; maybe we’re afraid to let other people see us really opened up; but for whatever reason, we’re usually the perfect picture of moderation and control. Mainline Protestants are sometimes referred to as God’s Frozen People.

It is tragically true that folks who are going through a particularly difficult time—say a period of grief following the death of a loved one—will sometimes stay away from church. Church is for when things are going along just fine, when we don’t have to worry about dissolving into tears with no warning. Church is a place to be intact, not falling apart.

But church *should* feel safe. “No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are always welcome here.” We mean that. But it’s still hard for us to come here when we feel truly vulnerable; and so it’s hard to cut loose and worship with all our hearts. We find ourselves a bit like the Mary Magdalene character in *Jesus Christ Superstar* who sings of Jesus, “I don’t know how to love him.”

Our gospel lesson for this morning is about worship: worship that is spontaneous, unrestrained, extravagant, inappropriate, even messy. There are very few stories that appear in all four gospels, but this is one of them. So this is an important story, and almost certainly reflects something that really happened in Jesus’ life.

But the truly interesting thing is that each of the four gospels tells the story differently, and each relates it to that gospel’s central emphases. In Matthew and Mark the woman who anoints Jesus is never named, even though the story ends with Jesus saying, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in

remembrance of her...” good old what’s-her-name. In this version the woman anoints Jesus’ head, not his feet. There is an objection that the costly perfumed ointment is worth three hundred denarii—a year’s wages for a typical laborer—and the money could have been given to the poor. In Mark the story takes place two days before the Passover and foreshadows Jesus’ death. It addresses the great theme regarding the mystery of who Jesus is. Marcus Borg and John Dominick Crossan, in their book based on Mark entitled, *The Last Week*, declare that in worshipping Jesus in this way, even before the first Easter, this unnamed woman becomes “the first Christian.”¹ Matthew places the story even later, during Holy Week. In Matthew this event is the last straw that causes Judas to go to the religious leaders with an offer to betray Jesus.²

Luke also tells this story featuring an unnamed woman. But in Luke she is “a sinner,” presumably a prostitute, who follows Jesus into a dinner party at the home of a prominent Pharisee. As Jesus reclines at the table she bathes his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair and anoints them with costly perfume. But in Luke this story takes place not near Holy Week, but very early in Jesus’ ministry, where it serves to emphasize the distance between sinners who worship Jesus without restraint and Pharisees who view him with alarm.³

So in each instance this important story lands on a central theme of the gospel in which it appears. The version we have this morning is no exception. In John the incident takes place six days before the Passover—roughly a week before the beginning of Holy Week—which is why we get it today. The woman has a name: Mary, the sister of Lazarus.⁴ In the previous chapter, Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. Now Mary and Martha have invited Jesus to dinner at their home in Bethany.

Once again, the person who anoints Jesus really understands who he is; but in this instance he’s not the hidden Messiah or the Messiah who has come to Jews and Gentiles alike. Instead, he’s the incarnate logos, the Word of God made flesh. Throughout John a remarkable cast of characters come to an awareness of who Jesus is, and their insights are captured in a marvelous

¹Borg and Crossan, *The Last Week*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, p. 105. See Mark 14:3-9.

² See Matthew 26:6-12 and 14-16.

³ Luke 7:36-50.

⁴ Luke includes a story regarding two sisters in which Martha fusses about the house while Mary sits at Jesus’ feet in the posture of a disciple; but he doesn’t set the story in Bethany, nor does he make any reference to Lazarus. See Luke 10:38-42.

array of poetic images: Jesus is the bread of life, the living water, the Good Shepherd, the light of the world, and so on. Now Martha and Lazarus and especially Mary have experienced Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life. And it is in this awareness that Mary takes a pound of perfumed ointment, anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair.

It is a richly symbolic act. She prepares his body for burial. She washes his feet in an act of humble service, as Jesus will do for his disciples in the next chapter. It is an extravagant offering of love: a year's wages worth of perfume poured out in a single moment of devotion. She offers the most precious thing she has to the one who is most precious to her.

It is also a very sensual act as she caresses Jesus' feet and the house is filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Once the scent is out, there's no getting it back in the jar. It expands to fill all the space; and that's probably a good thing, since Lazarus has so recently rejoined them from the tomb. Given the setting at a meal, all the senses come into play. This act of worship holds nothing back.

In every iteration of this story, the unbridled act of worship draws objections. It's a squandering of resources that could have been used for the poor; or it is the accepting of an offering from one who is unclean, unworthy to give it. But in each instance there is something disingenuous about the objection. *That* money is never really going to be used for the poor. The ointment would be saved for the burial of a loved one. But the point is that the one this person loves most is Jesus.

What truly seems offensive about this act is that it is so unrestrained, so seemingly out of proportion to the occasion. But that, too, is the point: this is not merely an act of ritual. It is an act of worship.

In each instance the worshipping woman knows with all her heart who Jesus is. And as she knows him, she loves him. She knows, in the depths of her soul, who Jesus is to her.

In a week we will begin our celebration of Holy Week. If we are to worship in spirit and in truth as we relive the events of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, we would do well to prepare ourselves by reflecting on who Jesus is to us. I think sometimes that our worship is so restrained because we haven't come to terms with what our worship truly means to us, or with what Jesus truly means to us. That sounds like an intellectual question, but really it's a question of relationship: who is Jesus to me? Why does he matter? How

does he matter? What is the nature of the life to which he calls me? What am I prepared to offer him?

The central affirmation of the gospels is that Jesus' suffering is not a random accident, but part of a greater purpose. Contrary to what we hear from most television preachers, that purpose goes beyond the simple satisfaction of a penalty, as though a bloodthirsty God has to demand that a price be paid for sin and a sinless Jesus steps forward to take on himself the sins of the world; as though somebody has to pay the fine and Jesus—the spotless lamb—is the only one with enough spiritual capital. That way of characterizing Jesus' death made sense in a world where getting right with God required taking an animal to the Jerusalem temple and offering a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. It is in this sense that we talk about Jesus being the Lamb of God, and in the context of ancient religious practice such language was very meaningful.

But it doesn't make a lot of sense to me to say that Jesus had to die in order that we might be forgiven, as though God's rules about forgiveness have to involve somebody's blood.

It *is* meaningful to me to say that Jesus died as a consequence of sin; that a life that is the embodiment of God's love inevitably runs headlong into the reality of sin, understood as a spiritual power that causes us to think and behave as though the world is supposed to revolve around us rather than around God. Every figure in the gospel story shows how the grip of sin distorts human relationships, perverts the heart, and issues in acts of cruelty.

- The Romans' lust for empire admitted no value but their own power, and made them willing to crucify all those who claimed that somebody else—even God—was in charge. The Roman soldiers were only too delighted to torture a self-proclaimed "King of the Jews".
- The religious leaders, too, were striving to preserve their own power: to maintain control and to resist any new expression of truth that might be on the horizon.
- The crowds wanted a quick fix, a messiah who would come along and deliver them from the Romans, but not from themselves: save me, God, fix my life and make it all easy... but don't change me.
- Even Jesus' closest followers, when it came down to it, were more intent on saving their own hides than in witnessing to a new truth from God, especially a truth that they could never quite manage to grasp.

Denials, betrayals, brutality, racism, torture... it's all there, a whole panorama of the fruits of human sinfulness, and Jesus walks right into it and meets it with love. He forgives his enemies, which is hard enough; and forgives his friends, which is harder still. Right into the valley of death he goes to show us that real glory has nothing to do with thrones or empires or any kind of power we know about; real glory has to do with the power of love to overcome treachery and sin.

Jesus suffered and died not because everybody was having a bad day, but because human beings in the grip of sin are capable of nothing better. The wages of sin is death; and Jesus' death was horrific.

But the central message of the Gospel is that God raised Jesus from the dead, and in so doing vindicated the message of love that Jesus taught and lived. We can be reconciled to God because Jesus embodied a love and forgiveness that sin and even death cannot stop. In the end love—not sin—is the greatest power in the universe; and never more powerful than when it appears to be completely helpless on the cross.

That's what Jesus means. That's what we need to keep in mind, through the darkness of Holy Week and through every dark night of the soul. We can say it in two words: love wins! We can say it in one word: YES! In Jesus Christ, God says yes to life. May we say YES to Jesus Christ.

Amen

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