

“Anointed”

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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“Out of my comfort zone.” So have some remarked about our recent “Ambassadors” program...or serving at Community Supper...or on a long-range planning committee. This is not a dig. Good for those who are self-aware enough to realize the Gospel stretches them. Those who take Christianity seriously must sometimes feel this tension

Out of my comfort zone. Not that I’m ever fully comfortable with scripture. I’m far too aware that Jesus reserved his most scathing criticisms for religious professionals who became complacent in their religiosity. Yet today’s Gospel is too much. Mary of Bethany—not Mary Magdalene nor Mary, Jesus’ mother but Mary, whose brother Lazarus Jesus raised from the dead—anooints Jesus’ feet with perfume and wipes them with her hair. It doesn’t get much more sensual than that. Think how this behavior would have been viewed at your last dinner party.

Then there is discomfort from Jesus himself. He seems to luxuriate in the attention and remarks that the poor will always be with us. The last is his dismissal of Judas’ criticism of the waste of expensive perfume that could have generated a little extra income. No, change that: a *lot* of extra income: 300 denarii, nearly a year’s wages for a laborer. That’s how expensive the perfume was. Lord knows it’s not easy being a treasurer for a group like Jesus’ that exists to give everything away. The Gospel writer says that Judas was a thief and cared nothing for the poor. Maybe both were true, and his later treachery makes it hard to take his side.

Still, his objection has merit. In his commentary on John, Fred Craddock, the great preacher of the late 20th century, writes:

Three hundred poinsettias fill the chancel at Christmas, five hundred lilies surround the cross at Easter. Then there is the gift of sterling Communion ware, the memorial chimes, the stained-glass windows. "In gratitude," says the donor; "a sinful waste" says not only Judas, but everyone who has seen hollow eyes over a tin cup or heard the whimpering of a hungry child. Common sense says we should plant onions, not roses, and yet a check of the shopping list, even of the poor, will reveal that among the potatoes, beans and pork will be flowers and perfume.

So, yes, I'm out of my comfort zone. You? We're in the midst of raising money to re-install the stained glass windows in the Chapel; and we're raising money and donations to send dental supplies to Appalachia. There's an order form for Easter flowers in today's bulletin; and we're recruiting for UM Army volunteers. We're recruiting children to sing in the "Praisemakers;" and the youth are selling candy to benefit impoverished folks in Haiti. As a colleague of mine used to say about dichotomies like this "It isn't a problem to be solved but a polarity to be managed."

Maybe our clue is in the anointing itself. Minus the extravagance, this is what would have been done in the first century for any dinner guest: wash a guest's feet, bathing off the dust and dirt of the journey. Anyone who has ever had a pedicure or a foot massage understands the warmth of this gift. And those familiar with the story to come know that Jesus, in Chapter 13, washes the feet of his disciples the night before his death as a reminder that they are not to be served but to serve.

Anointed! That's God's perspective, always a bit unsettling for us, celebrating with abandon, rejoicing over lost sheep and lost coins, bringing in the fatted calf for the prodigal son, feeding the multitudes, filling the fisherman's nets, changing water into wine and weeping into rejoicing. Robert Capon in Parables of Grace puts it this way: "*Unnecessary, spontaneous delight is the very root of God's relationship with the world.*"

Unnecessary delight is how God responds to us and how we can respond to each other. In the business community it's called the "level of delight," a pleasant surprise that offers even more than the customer expects. Yet how can we be anointed and anointing; blessed by a balm that brings healing and wholeness so that we might bless others with healing and wholeness? Two answers emerge from scripture. The first is the context of our extravagance. Jesus' rebuke to Judas was in the context of Jesus' imminent death. The one who had brought Lazarus back from death was, himself, about to die. The moments for celebrating were quickly slipping away. We are always more aware of life's fragility when death draws near. Anointing and being anointed makes every moment count.

The second answer is motivation. Mary, motivated by love and gratitude, caused her to give out of her own resources a gift worth a year's salary. We may marvel at this; we should marvel more when we remember that women of that time were often prevented from acquiring wealth and financial independence. This model of discipleship contrasts with Judas, who says the right things but whose motives are corrupt. Those who read the Upper Room Disciplines (as about 40 of you do) read this last Wed.:

This story calls us to check our motivations as well as our actions to be sure that we are taking the right actions for the right reasons. It also gives us permission to offer extravagant gifts of devotion to Jesus, even a donation to the poor.

This heart of love is the theological foundation of anointing. Each month we extend this invitation to healing prayer. There is no magic curing here; yet healing comes. We do not disregard the best of medical practice; yet the best technician alone is sometimes not enough. In love, before the throne of grace, we place before God our hearts deepest sighs—and sometimes our greatest joys—and, like Jesus, experience love in the tactile reassurance of touch, oil and prayer. If you are so led do not hesitate to come receive.

And do not hesitate to give as you are led to do, even in ways the world scorns as “extravagant.” The Rev. Patrick Willson tells this story:

In the Atlanta Farmer’s Market I waited in a long checkout line. Directly in front of me was an elderly gentleman, “nattily dressed” someone might have said in his youth. While we waited we struck up a conversation. I was fascinated by the assortment of Asian vegetables in his basket....yes, he explained, since the death of his wife 15 years before he had become quite a Chinese cook, though it was dreary cooking for one most of the time.

In the line ahead of us was a young woman with a son clinging to her jeans and an infant daughter asleep in the cart. The checker rang up her shopping and pointed to a bouquet of flowers she held. The young woman pointed to the cash register. The checker rang a total. The young woman looked at the total, then examined her wallet. She shook her head and handed the flowers across to the checker who laid them behind on the counter. Children in tow, the young mother wheeled toward the exit.

The old gentleman moved with a swiftness and certainty betraying his age. He motioned to the checker for the flowers, indicated that they went on his bill, and quickly caught up with the young mother. With a gesture that would have shamed Lancelot, he laid the bouquet of blossoms in her arms, bowed elegantly and returned to the line with a big smile. “I do hope she doesn’t think I’m a dirty old man,” he giggled, “but I so seldom have an opportunity to give anything to anyone.”

God has anointed us with love that cost him his son. Let our gratitude, like Mary’s, be an extravagant expression of our hearts.