

## Use the Best Stuff

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Date: March 17, 2013

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There's a moving story I know of a rabbi who once asked his students how they could tell when night had ended and day was returning. One of the students asked, "Is it when you can see an animal in the distance, and can tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the rabbi. Another student asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance, and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No," answered the rabbi. The students gave up and the rabbi said that you can tell when day is returning, "When you look on the face of another human being, and see that he or she is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot do that, then no matter what time it is, it is still night." [1]

The rabbi's words from this story ring true today. Because what we are confronted with in this morning's Gospel lesson is Mary's reaction to Jesus' presence, with Mary seeing Jesus as her brother and seeing light in her life contrasted with Judas' reaction to the whole scene, not seeing Jesus as his brother or Mary as his sister and therefore only seeing night. Mary looks at Jesus' face and sees him as her teacher, her brother she wants to care for before he embarks on the most difficult journey of his life, traveling in his last days on this earth to the cross. Judas looks at both of them, and sees only the negative; his heart is closed off to the compassion of God.

This is a story of extravagant generosity, compassion, and love. In fact, Mary's generosity is so over the top, it's almost uncomfortable. Mary takes the costly perfume and anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her own hair. Nard is a perfumed ointment that was imported from the Himalayas. [2] And Biblical scholars believe that this nard would have cost a whole year's worth of wages. Can you imagine this? Mary probably had this ointment in her house for years, saving it for a special occasion. She and Jesus both realized that it was during this dinner, six days before Passover, that the best stuff around needed to be used.

In these later chapters of John we see everyone around Jesus confronted with his imminent death and mortality in general and struggling with how to react. Questions of mortality haunted folks as much then as they may for us now. Actually, theologian Dorothee Soelle wrote *The Mystery of Death* a few years before she died in 2003, and in this book she wrestles with being at peace with our own finite nature as human beings and with the work she will undoubtedly leave undone, with the books that will go unwritten, and the things that will be left unsaid. Soelle says, "We will be like Jesus was, who stood up to defend the life of others and yet could accept his own death. We are learning to be like Jesus and to leave death behind us. Then our energies are not tied up in the contradictions and fear that we cannot and must not show; they are freed." [3]

Minister Stephen Shoemaker makes the case that Mary acts as the ideal disciple in this passage; her energies, even as she confronts Jesus' death, are not tied up in the fear that Soelle acknowledges we all may feel in the face of death. Mary anoints Jesus' feet and in so doing prepares him for burial. Mary seems at peace the entire time she performs this loving action. In Shoemaker's words, "She could comprehend and accept what Peter and the other disciples could not: the death of their master and Messiah." [4] Mary gets it, she knows that the time to act is now. That there is no time like the present to show just how much Jesus means to her and to give him courage in the face of his upcoming trials.

We see this empowerment of those we love in the face of death today particularly in holistic medicine and hospice care. Patients can get massage therapy or Reiki among other mind/body/spirit treatments as they near the end of life. Palliative Care units are made to look and

feel like home, that unit was known at the Cleveland Clinic for having the most comfortable chairs because they wanted that unit to soothe your soul as much as possible. In thinking of today's story specifically, we even had special anointing balms we chaplains could use to help patients cope spiritually—mint to help with nausea, lavender to calm the mind, and vanilla to help you relax and fall asleep. In these modern, loving practices of caring for one's whole self we see the idea that we have the power to offer an alternative to fear in the face of death and suffering. We do this by paying attention to the whole person in front of us.

Mary gives Jesus the over-the-top gift of anointing him with the best ointment to prepare him for death. John says "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."<sup>[5]</sup> She seizes the moment to act. It reminds me of advice from one of my favorite writers, Regina Brett of The Cleveland Plain Dealer. Brett was diagnosed with breast cancer at 41 and resolved to live every day to the fullest after her cancer treatment. Brett writes, "Cancer taught me to stop saving things for a special occasion, because every day is special." And she goes on to say she's not talking about money, that as a writer, she has taken to heart the advice of fellow writer Annie Dillard to use all your good material now. "Don't save an anecdote, paragraph, quote, beginning or ending for some better novel or poem or short story you plan to write sometime in the future. The fact that you want to use it means you should. It takes an act of faith. You have to trust that once you use up the good stuff, more good stuff will appear. The well will fill back up."<sup>[6]</sup>

Can't we do this in our own lives? Use up the good stuff now and trust, have deep and abiding faith that more good stuff will appear. Paint the picture you always wanted to paint, begin that project you've been dreaming of forever, write that book that's on your heart, travel to that destination you've always wanted to go, say and do kind and loving things for the people who mean the most to you. Actually, say and do kind and loving things as much as possible—use up the good stuff, the best stuff. Not because we want to, but because we need to in order to keep our wells full of Christ's compassion and love.

Now I think that Mary did save this costly ointment imported from the Himalayas for a special occasion. If I had to guess, I bet it was sitting around her house for years because it would have taken her years to buy it in the first place. But when she recognizes that the time has come to use up this ointment, she doesn't hesitate to use the best stuff around. And she does so with an open and glad heart.

It's so different from an Indian folktale I once read about the importance of generosity which frankly echoes Judas' reaction far more than Mary's. That tale begins with a poor beggar who sat in the streets of an Indian town day after day, begging folks who walked by for rice. And then one day he heard that the emperor was coming to town, so he made sure that he went and sat on the route where the emperor would pass by. The emperor passed him in his coach and got out. As the beggar was beginning to hold out his bag and ask the emperor for rice or for money come to that, the emperor actually asked the beggar if he could have some of the beggar's rice.

The beggar was shocked and disappointed; he grudgingly counted out five grains of rice and gave them to the emperor with a bitter and cold heart. The emperor thanked him warmly and graciously and went on his way. That night the beggar went to prepare his meal and noticed that something was shining among the grains of rice in his bag—five nuggets of gold, one for each of the grains of rice the beggar gave the emperor.<sup>[7]</sup>

What if he had been more generous? What if he had been like Mary with her costly jar of ointment, a whole year's salary, and given the emperor the best he had to give? It's an amazing tale about what the lack of generosity will get us, what our lives look like when we sit in the

night and keep our wells empty. The beggar is reminiscent of Judas and his closed heart, and this lack of compassion does cost him in the end.

In our Gospel story Judas doesn't give anything to Jesus, not even his real love and devotion, the greatest gift he could give. It's no wonder that Judas immediately begrudges Mary's gift. Judas says to her, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"[8] We're told that he didn't care about giving money to the poor, he'd steal from the box in which Jesus and his disciples kept their shared money. Judas shows that he is deeply resentful of this over the top display of extravagance. And there's a part of me that can't help but feel bad for the guy because his heart is so closed off to the compassion of God and he just doesn't get it.

Judas spent years walking around with Jesus listening to his teachings, seeing all the instances of abundant love and generosity Jesus showed to everyone around him. And yet it seems to have had no effect on Judas at all. He wouldn't have comprehended the words the rabbi once spoke, that if you can't look at the face of another person and see that person as your brother or your sister, "then no matter what time it is, it is still night." [9] Judas views Mary's action of ideal discipleship as misguided, naïve, and wasteful. It's a sad way to be in this life especially when he sees an alternative way right in front of his eyes.

In the end we have a great deal to learn from Mary and from Judas. Let's not allow our energies even in the face of mortality to be tied up in contradictions and fears. Let's give far more than five grains of rice by giving the best we have to God, the costliest ointment we possess. Let's use the best stuff now to give comfort to those who need it the most and have faith that our wells will overflow with God's love that can sustain and redeem us in the days ahead. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Margaret Silf, Ed. "Signs of Daybreak," in One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World, 84.

[2] Harper Collins Study Bible, John 12:3 Footnote, 2037.

[3] Dorothee Soelle, The Mystery of Death, 129.

[4] Stephen Shoemaker, Homiletical Perspective of John 12:1-8 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2, 143.

[5] John 12:3.

[6] Regina Brett, God Never Blinks 50 Lessons for: Life's Little Detours, 98-99.

[7] Margaret Silf, Ed. "The Emperor's Gift," in One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World, 87-88.

[8] John 12:5.

[9] Margaret Silf, Ed. "Signs of Daybreak," in One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World, 84.