

The Ministry of Presence

John 12:1-8

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden; April 7, 2019 (Communion Sunday)

Our shared Lenten journey brings us to a pivotal text from the Gospel of John that will powerfully set the tone of who Jesus is, what awaits him in Jerusalem, and what it means to be present as one who wants to follow him. An essential component of today's theme is being willing to minister to each other while holding both the reality of suffering and remaining open to what may come. At the heart of it is a woman's courage to perform a highly symbolic act.

In the context of John's Gospel, Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead (chapter 11) and the religious authorities have already decided to find a way to arrest Jesus (11:57). They will even plot to kill Lazarus to erase the evidence of the power inherent in Jesus as the Christ (12:9-11). Jesus is now on the way to Jerusalem, stopping to his dear friends. Mary and Martha, who are the sisters of Lazarus, serve Jesus in different ways for the journey ahead. Martha serves a fine meal of hospitality for Jesus and his disciples that will help to sustain them. Mary surprises everyone by bringing a pound of very expensive nard to the table – notice that the Gospels vary as to which woman does the anointing and in what setting (Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13). In any case, a pound of such oil cost the equivalent of a laborer's yearly wage in her time. She uses it to anoint Jesus' feet and then spreads the oil on his skin with her own hair.

What was so important about anointing and why would she anoint his feet? According to Exodus 33, anyone who used the ritual of anointing improperly, should be cast out from the people. It is clearly a sacred ritual invoking the power of God. Among those who were anointed, were the dead and new kings. A new king was anointed by having oil poured over his head and beard. The word Hebrew Messiah which was translated as "Christ" in Greek literally means "the anointed one." When Mary anoints Jesus, she identifies him as the Messiah, the blessed one of God come to serve God's people and set them free. Why not anoint his head? I imagine that this is a deliberate way of symbolizing that Jesus is a different kind of king. We have been hearing this theme since Christmas. Jesus does not come to dominate, oppress or use force of any kind. He has come to serve and heal and to call us to service of each other.

By anointing his feet and then using her hair to spread the oil is Mary's most potent way of saying that she gets this message and offers ALL of herself to serve as Christ serves. I wonder if she is anticipating, or perhaps inspiring, Jesus' own washing of his disciples' feet on the night of his betrayal. Keep in mind that John features the foot washing as a sign of a new way of relating, not the last supper/communion as the other Gospels do.¹ Peter will actually struggle with the invitation to have his feet washed by Jesus who, in turn, insists that Peter will only be able to follow him if he will receive Christ's whole making love and service (John 13:7-8).

In our story, it is Judas who raises an objection. He was the keeper of the purse and the Gospel of John implies that Judas' had the ill intentions of a thief when he challenges Mary's action by asking, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (12:4).² Jesus intervenes and says. "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (12:7). In other words, Mary's action also foreshadows Jesus' death. As women come to anoint the body of someone who has died, she is also anticipating anointing him for the day of his burial. She knows how the powers that be will respond to Jesus' ministry of compassionate healing. Jesus is a threat to the whole ritualistic sacrificial cultic system by which the religious elite think they can control people's access to God and God's healing. Mary acts as a loving and real presence to her friend who is willing to die to everything but love rather than withdraw in fearfulness. She also does not numb herself with denial about what Jesus will endure. She acknowledges death and offers her witnessing love. Mary has also seen her own brother raised from the dead. Perhaps she dwells in a liminal, threshold place, of trusting God though she cannot fully know all that is to come.

Though the text implies that Judas is preoccupied with greed, I also wonder if his actions can illumine other common human tendencies. I wonder if his question is also a kind of diversion or other form of avoidance. It allows him to focus beyond his own questions and unease about who Jesus really is as one who keeps upending expectations. As a so-called zealot,

¹ It is not that one account is right and the other wrong but that they are telling the story differently to make their interrelated points about a new way of being in covenant.

² Sadly, the Gospel of John comes close to and perhaps sometimes crosses the line by identifying "the bad guys" rather than noting the shared failings and responsibilities of all of us.

Judas was likely from a faction that expected the Messiah to get rid of the Roman occupiers. Judas' response may also simply be an example of our common human tendency to want to jump in and fix things rather than be with the pain we are encountering around and within us and letting it transform us.

When Jesus responds to Judas by saying, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (12:8), I don't hear this as a dismissal of the poor. It may be the sad acknowledgment about our human tendency to live in systems that profit from having an underclass. If we take this all a level deeper, perhaps Jesus is also acknowledging what happens when we label people into categories rather than engage in relationship with another. By saying, "You do not always have me," Jesus is naming his coming death but he is also naming the power of particularity. Each person is unique though we all belong to God and are an outpouring of God's creating presence in the world. We are unique and we are part of one who originating ground of being.

Today's text stresses the particular. Mary has understood this and her powerful witness of presence and availability to Jesus is not to be dismissed, though Judas cannot bear it. We are called to the same quality of presence. When someone is struggling with an illness, when someone is dealing with debilitating side effects from treatment, when a person is struggling through divorce, someone finds themselves in the land of confusion, someone is trying to crawl out of a hole called relapse, when someone is nearing their own death, when someone is exhausted from caring for others ... we are called to be present to the unique manifestation of the presence of the dying and rising Christ in each other. This also includes people fleeing their homes and countries due to war, corruption and violence, or the ravages of climate change. Each person, each creature, is more than a label.

Next week, we will be collecting an offering for One Great Hour of Sharing which makes aid in disaster zones possible and helps refugees. Raising funds, too, is important. However, let us remember today that the world will not change until we dare to actually be present enough to be touched and transformed by the real suffering around us.

In closing, I would like to tell you a story about how a little two-year old girl prompted a grown man to dare such presence in a life changing way. Paul Trost, the grown son of a friend of mine, volunteered in an orphanage in Haiti several years ago.³ The orphanage was filled with little children, most of them sitting or lying in their cribs, crying for someone to hold them.

Paul described his experience to his parents in a letter: *“I stumbled past row after row of those cribs in a sea of tears. I was numbed by it all. Finally, I summoned the strength to take one of these fragile children into my arms. Then I lifted up another and walked outside into the sunshine. I began to sing little songs to the children. Though they could not understand the words, they smiled with the melody. I sang for more than an hour, returned the children to their cribs and said good-bye. As I was about to leave, I was captured by a little girl, about two years old, who stood out because she was smiling. She stood in her crib, motioning to me and pointing away from herself, to a little boy whose tears were insatiable. I went to him and held him close to me. The little girl continued to smile. I set him down. She motioned to me again, pointing me to another child who wanted to be held.”* Paul went on and on holding little children as the little girl instructed him to do.

And so they served together. Somehow, the little girl seemed to have a peace in her that allowed her to look to the needs of others. I trust it was not just a game for her. She challenged Paul to dare to keep having his heart broken open as he was a loving witness and presence to real unique and suffering children. Mary also calls us to go on ministering to life regardless of what the circumstances say, to let our hearts be opened wide and anointed by tears and smiles because that is what God does through Jesus, the Christ. Let us pray for the courage to follow in the way of such love and to remain open to what God’s future may hold. Amen

³ This story is taken almost verbatim from an essay written by Rev. Dr. Fred Trost, “Taking the Bible Seriously.”