

5th Sunday in Lent
 March 21, 2010
 Rev. Patricia Weatherwax

John 12:1-11
 More Spiritual Practices: Can You Be Like Mary?

Worship Theme:

A woman named, Mary Hampton, in her devotional book "Tea and Inspiration" writes this: I would like to believe that I have a heart like Mary's, one that stops to listen to God whenever the opportunity arises. I am afraid though, that I probably come much closer to being like Martha. Hurrying about, planning, preparing, fixing, organizing, making lists, and worrying. *Will it all get done?* ... These thoughts can overtake me during church, while having my devotions, in the midst of prayer- almost anywhere, the still, small voice of the Lord can get drowned out by the shouts of living... I still believe that the planning, preparing, fixing, and organizing are important. I believe it is important to God. After all, I am trying to be faithful to do well the tasks He has set before me. I need to remember, though, that by far the most important thing I can do is to take the time to sit at Jesus' feet and really listen."

Introduction:

In a performance evaluation during my chaplain training my supervisor called me Martha-like. That's because I would jump up and dash out of the office at every opportunity to serve the patients and their families. He encouraged me to be more like Mary- able to sit and listen to and for God. The three references in the scripture to Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, all have Mary being less-traditional and more demonstrative than her servant-hearted sister Martha.

Mary:

- sat at Jesus' feet, listening, when there was kitchen work to do.
- knelt at Jesus' feet, sobbing when her brother died. (On careful reading, that account, found in John 11, just before today's text, infers Sister Martha was more collected and leaned on her religious training and faith after Lazarus' death.) And Mary
- poured costly perfume over Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.

Yes, I am more like Martha. Probably most of us are not much like Mary as described in the passage you listened to from John's gospel.

Virtues that we admire are often in conflict with the demonstrations of Mary from Bethany. Generally

- We do what is appropriate and expected.
- We are frugal, certainly not wasteful.
- We are stoic, and self-controlled.

These are more in keeping with the traditions of our faith and our families of origin. In our culture those attributes, planning, frugality, and stoicism are seen as appropriate and somehow "more Christian". But Jesus the Christ appreciated and even affirmed Mary's actions. Even though-

Mary's behavior was spontaneous:

Mary seemed to act rather impetuously. We don't know the whole story about the alabaster flask of nard, as it is referred to in the gospels of Matt, Mark and Luke. Some suggest that, given the value of the perfume it was part of Mary's dowry. The passage from John infers that Mary knew Jesus' death was imminent, and that it was supposed to be saved for his burial. But she just couldn't keep it until then. Kind of like when you buy the perfect Christmas or birthday gift for someone, but then give it to them early because you are so thrilled with the gift.

Wonder with me, like the children in their Worship Center. What was Mary thinking? Did the words around the table make her fear for Jesus' life? Did she think it was going to be impossible to give him a proper burial? Did the devotion and appreciation she felt to the teacher, who had brought her brother back to life, lead her to act so impulsively? If Jesus had come and raised my brother physically up from his death bed, I could have washed Jesus' feet with my tears, tears of gratitude and joy.

Did Mary later regret her spontaneous display of affection? Since Jesus discouraged people from criticizing her action we can only imagine that he appreciated her spontaneous, extravagant and passionate expression.

From a book, *50 Ways to Feel Great Today: Keys to Beating Stress, Worry, and the Blues*, I give you this suggestion:

“... acting spontaneously from time to time can help you become more relaxed and uninhibited and more resilient should adversity come your way. Being okay with having some unknowns in your day can force you to focus on what you really need to get done so you can finish whatever it is and go play. Spontaneity can also help you deal with stress. The better you can cope with unknown situations, the less stress you will accrue.” Good advice.

We really can't *plan* to be spontaneous, that's an oxymoron. But we can practice it until it is more natural for us. Remember the “Random Acts of Kindness” movement from a few years ago? It seems to have faded from our consciousness, but really it's alive and well.

A small, unplanned act of kindness by a Chicago-area pastor has inspired the creation of the 365 Club – a Facebook group whose members are each committed to performing 365 acts of kindness per year. They've been active for over a year, and 2009 was a success.

The 365 Club was inspired by a real-life story of kindness from Pastor David Ferguson of Community Christian Church in Naperville, Ill. Ferguson had walked into a Kinko's copy store holding a Starbucks coffee when one of the employees joked, “Hey, where is mine?”

Ferguson immediately asked, “What do you want ... I'm buying!” He also offered to buy the two other Kinko's employees working in the store at the time the coffee drink of their choice.

When he got back with their favorite coffees in hand, the pastor recalled in his blog: “They were super grateful, and it was just a fun and spontaneous random act of kindness.”

He then posted his Kinko's-Starbucks story on Facebook and not long after his friend took the idea and set up a Facebook group, 365 Club.

I joined the group the other day. But it's not about reading posts with mouse clicks. As a member of the group said, it's about starting the “day looking for opportunities to do kindness. They recognize the world is in dire need of kindness. They understand a simple act of kindness can have HUGE repercussions for changing the world.”

Is there room in our life to be a little more spontaneous?

Jesus the Christ affirmed Mary's actions. Even though-

Mary was Extravagant!

Nard was imported from the Himalayas. The translations of the volume or weight vary, but the best estimate is that it was about 12 ounces of the precious anointing oil. In our setting, taking minimum wage of \$7.40 x 40 hours a week X 50 weeks in a year, the 300 denarii perfume is worth about \$15,000, over \$1,200 per ounce. That's not just generous, that's *extravagant*. But Mary was in a special place emotionally and spiritually.

So let's wonder some more. First let's wonder if we even have the means to be that extravagant! I don't have any perfume that's worth \$1200 at my house. Wouldn't we, if our dear friend and teacher were facing death, do whatever we could to express our love?

A.B. Bruce, in his work, *The Training of the Twelve*, understood: He writes- "There was such a love in her heart for her friend and benefactor as imperatively demanded expression, and yet could not find expression in words. She must do something to relieve her pent-up emotions: she must get an alabaster jar and break it, and pour it upon the person of Jesus, else her heart will break. Not just words but perfume; not just any perfume, but a very expensive jar of perfume; not just some of the jar but all of it until the entire house smelled of it; not just wiping the Lord's feet once they had been wet with the perfume, but wiping them with her own hair."

Jesus was called the messiah, which translates to the anointed one. And yet this is the only account we have of his being anointed, before his burial. A few days later Jesus washed his disciples' feet, another spontaneous and emotionally extravagant action, and one that was also challenged as inappropriate. But another lesson for us, extravagant servanthood.

This is not a stewardship campaign, but just more wondering. What do we value and how do we express our love? Are we frugal to the point of feeling constrained and pinched? Always holding tightly to our possessions and funds? Or are we so graciously extravagant that we are as "giddy as a schoolgirl" like Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning?

When I STOP and admire this beautiful building I realize that, to some it was probably seen as extravagant when it was built. Sometimes being practical does not give glory to God. Being more than generous, being thrilled to give freely, it's an act of worship. It's worshipful *IF* the motive is like Mary's- to honor our savior. Is there room in our life to be a little more *extravagant*?

Mary was Passionate:

We see Mary's love for Jesus expressed physically - deep, grateful, demonstrative, and *passionate* love. Every scripture text in my study Bible's concordance used passionate as a synonym for lustful. Being passionate can be pure, depending on motive and interpretation of the word. This act of Mary was recorded as a sensual experience. The sight and scent and sound, were all experienced by Jesus, his disciples and the men of Bethany.

The author A.B Bruce, as cited above, also reminds us that what Mary did was "not in private, but in public, a woman in public with many men in the room, men who, if she stopped to think about it, could almost be calculated to ridicule her for what she was about to do. Imagine what that woman would have looked like both doing that deed and after it was done -- but she didn't care. Love made her utterly careless of everything but showing her love!"

I wonder- are we ever passionate about expressing our appreciation of God's grace to us, as seen in what we call "Christ's Passion"? I wonder what it would look like if we were more passionate about this church, this community, our world and especially about expressing our faith, in relation to all of these.

Our affection toward Jesus is something that can be expressed holistically, by our body, mind and spirit. He is our Lord and God; he is our best friend; he is our lover, in the purest sense of the word, the lover of our souls.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And, (he said) a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt 22:36-39)

Our affection toward those within these walls could be the same. With Christ there is:

- Unity in the spiritual bond, we share,
- "being of the same mind", emotionally, and
- there is the sensual, physical experience of worship. Sight, scent and sound. Each week, and especially when we "observe" the sacraments.

If we really love Christ and one another we can be passionate together in our worship. We say being self-controlled is most appropriate. Is there room in our life to be a little more *passionate*?

Conclusion:

Mary's spontaneous, extravagant, passionate action gives us some things to think about. How do we say "thank you to Jesus"? Do we? As we move through Lent to Holy Week, consider what the cross says to us. The cross says Jesus loves you, in amazing ways. His crucifixion, while not a spontaneous act, certainly was unexpected. And most of all it was extravagant and passionate. Every one of us, whether we know it or not, has been touched in some way by the love of God as expressed in Jesus, the anointed one. Oh, how he loves you and me!

"Alabaster Box" as sung by Cece Winans

Verse 1

The room grew still as she made her way to Jesus
She stumbles through the tears that made her blind
She felt such pain, some spoke in anger
Heard folks whisper, there's no place here for her kind.
Still on she came, through the shame that flushed her face
Until at last she knelt before His feet.
And though she spoke no words
Everything she said was heard,
As she poured her love for the Master
From her box of Alabaster.

Chorus

And I've come to pour my praise on Him
Like oil from Mary's Alabaster Box
Don't be angry if I wash His feet with my tears
And I dry them with my hair.
You weren't there the night He found me.
You did not feel what I felt when He wrapped His love all around me.
And you don't know the cost of the oil in my Alabaster Box.

Verse 2

I can't forget the way life used to be.
I was a prisoner to the sin that had me bound
I spent my days pouring my life without measure.
Into a little treasure box I thought I found.
Until the day when Jesus came to me
And healed my soul with the wonder of His touch.
So now I'm giving back to Him all the praise He's worthy of.
I've been forgiven and that's why I love Him so much.

Chorus

And I've come to pour my praise on Him
Like oil from Mary's Alabaster Box
Don't be angry if I wash His feet with my tears
And I dry them with my hair, my hair.
You weren't there the night Jesus found me.
You did not feel what I felt when He wrapped His love all around me.
And you don't know the cost of the oil
Oh, you don't know the cost of my praise.
You don't know the cost of the oil
In my Alabaster Box.