

“MARY SEES THE LIGHT”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2016

Text: John 12:1-8

What does this mean: that Mary anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair; Judas makes a sound objection to the seemingly pointless extravagance; and Jesus defends Mary, saying “You always have the poor with you; but you do not always have me”? What does this mean?

For Rudolf Bultmann, and for me, what we witness here is a *culminating expression of faith*. The Gospel of John was written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing in him, we might have life—John 20:31. Out of the mass of communal memories of Jesus John chose a few stories to share with posterity in such a way that they would illuminate the point of Jesus: coming into the world, witnessing to the Father, being crucified, rising, and appearing to his disciples.

What does this mean . . . this Jesus thing? That is the question John answers, very efficiently, with every verse of his Gospel.

In chapter 12, John is approaching the turning point in his gospel. Up till now he has been telling what Jesus said and did in order to convince us that Jesus reveals the Father to us. We call that part “the book of signs.” Beginning in chapter 13 we will hear the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We call that “the book of glory.”

Every piece of the gospel works to the single end of portraying Jesus to us in such a way that we believe in him and have life. That the glory of Jesus is somehow to give us light and life. That Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. John wants us to see that Jesus wants us to see the light.

If we want to know what it means that Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, Judas criticized her, and Jesus defended her, we should ask how it serves John’s purpose. There are similar stories about a woman washing or anointing Jesus’ feet in Mark and Luke. But within those gospels they illustrate different points, so we will not take time to compare them. Let’s listen to John. What does this mean, that Mary anoints Jesus’ feet?

First, she is hereby giving thanks to Jesus.

You cannot separate thanks from faith. They are practically synonymous, but with different accents, just as praise and thanksgiving are tied very closely to each other but have some differences.

Mary’s believing in Jesus is expressed in Mary’s thanks to Jesus. She has much to be thankful for. She has just received the most wonderful gift anyone ever received from Jesus. Jesus brought her brother Lazarus back from the dead.

To say Mary was thankful is to say two things: She *recognized* that Jesus was the one who had given her this gift. And she recognized that Jesus *didn’t have to* give her this gift, didn’t owe it to her, but did it out of love for her and Martha and Lazarus, his dear friends. So it was not just a feeling, it was a “thinking.” And together, what she thought and what she felt at this moment towards Jesus was absolute and pure thanks.

They say “the truth will out.” Well, in this case, the truth came out. The truth about the interior state of gratitude in Mary’s heart for the gift of life had to come out. Not in some calculating way, but in an uncalculated display which lifted up the one to whom she was grateful. If she

had known the hymn "Take My Life" which we will sing during communion, she could have sung that.

Take my life, that I may be consecrated, Lord, to thee

Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, my love, my feet, my voice, my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.

Take my love: my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store; take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee. (Where do you think the poet got the expression "pour at thy feet" if not from this story?)

Mary had an epiphany when Jesus brought her brother to life. She had reproached Jesus with not getting there in time to save Lazarus while he was still alive, but Jesus had responded with "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Then he revealed the glory of God, which is to give life, and she believed. Totally.

Mary's epiphany was this: Jesus *was* the resurrection and the life. The result of the epiphany? Faith in Jesus, that he was the Messiah, the Son of God. The outcome of her faith: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, consecration, the giving of whatever was precious to her to Jesus.

(In our Second Reading Paul reveals that he felt the same way. "I had everything," he says. "I was one lucky and happy fellow." But then, "because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord," he came to "regard everything else—*by comparison*—as loss.")

Back to Mary. "Faith" is only one word for what she felt and thought and did at that moment, but it is the best one because it is the one which helps us see this in the light of everything else in the Gospel of John. Jesus did what he did so that she might have faith. John wrote the gospel so we might share her faith.

And Jesus is about to tell us something important about faith in him. At the end of chapter 12, Jesus says something that (sadly) does not make it into the lectionary. Never gets read in church unless someone pulls it into a sermon! Jesus says "Whoever believes in me believes *not in me but in him who sent me*. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in darkness." Etc. Mary is thankful because Mary has seen the light.

On the other hand, Judas has not.

For Judas, Jesus is a program to carry out. He wasn't the only one of Jesus' disciples to think this way, but he serves here as an example of all those to whom Jesus came who did not accept him or received him only superficially, while continuing to live by their own light.

Judas still lives in a world of people criticizing each other and telling each other what to do and trusting in appearances. He puts down Mary's offering of faith because he is blind to what is actually taking place. She sees, he is blind. (As Jesus once said to some who would not listen to him: "Because you say 'We see' you are blind.")

Judas, Judas. How Jesus would have loved to gather you, too, under his wings, but you would not. You had to keep making your own plans. Your hymn was not "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee," but "Take my life and let it be!" "Leave it the way it is."

A calculating man, he thought by appealing to Jesus' own tremendous compassion for the poor he could get Jesus on his side and he could look good and maybe he could even work it out so that he would not only look good, but he could get a little money on the side.

Judas is not unique. He stands for us whenever we throw a cloak of piety over our self-interest, whenever we “act” Christian. Judas may have slept through the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said that his disciples should not make a show of their almsgiving. Even when the alms they are offering belong to somebody else, like when Mary was pouring a lot of money onto Jesus’ feet and into the ground.

Finally, what does this mean, that Jesus says “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me”? Two things: First, Jesus is kindly agreeing with Judas’ sentiment that Jesus’ people must always be aware of the needs of the poor. But having said that, he is reproving Judas for not recognizing him. Not seeing who is there before him. Judas does not see that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and therefore is not receiving life from him.

A last word: Mary’s offering to Jesus is echoed in our gathering this morning. It took place, John says pointedly, “six days before the Passover.” That is to say, on the Sunday before the crucifixion of our Lord. First century Christians would have noticed this, and we should, too. Our feast of thanksgiving is like Mary’s, who knew and loved a savior who would die to give his friends life. We see the light Mary saw, and we walk in that light. Amen.

