

March 19, 2017

Mark 14: 1-15

Lent 3 – Mary Magdalene, the Beloved

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“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight O God, our strength and our redeemer”

There is so much in this monologue this morning, based on Mark 11: 12-19 and 14: 1-15...There is much to talk about in Jesus’ actions in the temple – and the place of women in that time and culture, but for today what I have been drawn to the most are the words of Jesus in response to Mary’s anointing and the men’s discomfort. Jesus said:

“Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing for me...She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

This beautiful and tender anointing is bracketed by brutality, as just before it we are told there is a plot by the threatened religious authorities to have Jesus killed, and soon after it, we will read of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus.

Mary’s anointing is a gift of love and kindness in a cruel world. This was something she had the power and the heart to do on his behalf; she seized the moment and honored him with an extravagant outpouring of herself.

And Mary had really listened to the words of Jesus who expected that his killing was imminent. The others did not want to hear Jesus speak in that way – even denying the truth of his words, while Mary listened and took it in.

It was their custom to anoint the dead before burial; Mary may have suspected that would not be possible under these circumstances, so she ministered to him before it happened, pouring the soothing oil on his skin, carefully massaging his tired hands and feet. Truly a loving and intimate moment of respect and care at a sad and frightening time.

Mary has something to teach us about how to accompany the dying.

She has something to teach us about how to be a companion at a time when we cannot fix or solve or change an outcome as certain and often heart-breaking as death is.

Ultimately, all we have to give at a time like that is ourselves – and that is enough.

What the dying often need is someone who is not in denial or afraid, or who can at least set these feelings aside for a time and be present to the beloved person before them. If we are able to relax our own heart, mind, and body while we come alongside them – it in turn will help them be more relaxed; the less pain they will have.

Mary's fear and sadness must have been intense, and yet it seems as though she was able to simply be present to Jesus, whom himself, must have been afraid of what was ahead.

In my experience, when talking with people about death I often hear fear about the process of dying itself – no one wants to be in physical pain, and sometimes there is fear for what happens after death – whether they are a person who believes in God or not – there is fear around the unknown.

While no one can take those fears away, we companion people best when we can give them space to speak those fears without trying to fix them or negate them. This is not easy, as it means we have to manage our own fears and desire to make it all better for someone...Mary can inspire us to do what we **can** do: we can dig deep and find the strength to listen – hold a hand – massage the feet – give them space to express the fear if they wish to.

We express our love through our eyes, through our showing up.

And despite the stories we can read about near death experiences – no one can tell us what exactly is on the other side of death, yet an experience told by Henri Nouwen entitled “The Catcher Will Always Be There for You” provides an image which suggests that **as we wonder and anticipate that big step, we consider trust instead of fear.** I would like to share it with you:

Nouwen tells about the opportunity he had to get to know a family of trapeze artists called the “Flying Rodleighs”. He was enraptured by their art.

He was invited to attend one of their practices and was taught about how you become a good flyer as opposed to a catcher. The flyer is the one who releases his or her body from the bar and flies into the hands of the catcher.

The leader of the troupe told Henri about being a flyer: “The public might think that I am the star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump...The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything.

When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar.”

Nouwen was surprised to hear this – “What? You do nothing?”

“Nothing”, said the flyer – “The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me.

If I grabbed Joe’s wrists, I might break them or he might break mine and that would be the end of both of us. A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there for him.”

When Nouwen heard this he thought of Jesus’ words: “Father into your hands, I commend my Spirit.”

Dying is trusting in the catcher...” Nouwen continues: “To care for the dying is to say, “Don’t be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don’t try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust.”

I like to think of Mary as providing an experience like that for Jesus as she massaged the oil into his feet and hands. It was something she could do for him – and it was a way of giving from her heart.

To come alongside a loved one who is dying is to say with our eyes, our smile, our touch, our presence: “Don’t be afraid, remember you are a beloved child of God. God will be there when you make your long jump. Don’t try to grab him; he will grab you. Just strength out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust...”

Amen.

