



SERMONS THAT WORK

Monday in Holy Week

Extravagant Love

[RCL]: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

*Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,
wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;
love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.*

This is the first verse of hymn 204 in our hymnal and, while it is an Easter hymn and we are not yet there, its lines echo our natural surroundings in the northern hemisphere. We travel the turning of the seasons in conjunction with Holy Week, glimpsing signs of spring in the world around us, just as we receive a foretaste of the signs of Jesus' journey to the cross in our scriptures this week.

In our Gospel story today, we find Jesus attending a dinner that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are giving in his honor. It seems to be a farewell dinner, a predictor, in John's Gospel, for the last supper that would occur in just a few days. Mary is moved to anoint Jesus' feet with costly perfume and wipe them with her hair, in the same way Jesus will with the disciples' feet not long after this encounter. The house was "filled with the fragrance of the perfume"—a significant image in contrast to when the same sisters went with Jesus to Lazarus' tomb and were afraid of the stench within. Now, the house is filled not with the smell of death, but with the perfume of a costly act of love. Mary's anointing of Jesus filled the entire house with fragrance, just as our expressions of faith in and love for Jesus spread widely around our community. Her act is a sign of her true discipleship and, because she has paid attention to Jesus and the events happening around her, she is the first disciple who understands that heartbreak is coming. Mary loves Jesus lavishly, without thought to cost.

Grief expert, author, and speaker David Kessler gave a lecture on February 19, 2019, entitled *On Grief and Grieving*. He explains something called anticipatory grief as the "grieving we do before the person dies." This type of grief is primarily non-verbal, meaning that people are often unable to express their grief in words; their actions reveal it in other ways. Depression, anxiety, irritability, anger, fear, loneliness, unexpected sadness, and crying are all manifestations of anticipatory grief.

One of the ways that a person can help mitigate this anticipatory grief is to connect deeply with their loved one while they are still alive, doing things that are meaningful together, and finding ways to show what the loved one means to them. Marking this time before death can aid in the healing process after death occurs. It is helpful for both the person or pet that is dying and the person who will be bereft.

Marking time is something that the Church does very well. We have our liturgical calendar that takes us through the year, in addition to the many rites and prayers included in our Book of Common Prayer and its supplements. There are several pastoral offices in our prayer book that are especially considered healing rites: reconciliation of a penitent, ministration to the sick, and ministration at the time of death. In their own particular set of circumstances, each of these rites gives us the ability to have a spiritual, emotional, and physical container in which to pour our grief and sadness, while marking significant times in life. They do not promise a cure but instead invite us into healing and wholeness within the relationship of our loving God. To have another bear witness to our circumstances is a powerful tool for healing. It is also an extravagant gift of love—a reminder of God’s love for us and of the way we are called to bear that love to another physically and with immediacy.

Mary loved Jesus extravagantly. What do you do when someone you have journeyed with in life is going to die? Mary’s answer was to love in the same way that Jesus had shown her. She exemplifies discipleship and understands it before Jesus explicitly teaches the disciples his commandment to love. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ true disciples are not just the twelve men, but any person who loves him and responds out of this love. Mary marks this time with meaning, and her ritual of pouring out the costly perfume and wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair is part of her anticipatory grief. She was transformed from a woman—seen as near-worthless in her culture and society—into someone with purpose and call. The love she reveals is a testament to the relationship she had with Jesus and what it meant to her.

In contrast, Judas can only sneer at what she did. In false piety, he asks why the perfume was not sold and given to the poor, when, in reality, he wanted to skim off the top of the profits. Our evangelist, John, explains that Judas was a thief—he would steal from the common purse and did not care for the poor. We also know that Judas ultimately betrays Jesus, and while we hope to take after Mary, we may wonder how often we too, play Judas’ part.

We are faced with two very different reactions to Jesus: Mary’s response of the fullness of life in discipleship and Judas’ denial of that same path. Yet, the two probably feel familiar to each of us because we are comprised of both. We have a little Mary and a little Judas sitting on each shoulder, don’t we? The Judas stops us from being extravagant with God’s love because of arguments about practicality, which are often self-justifying, while the Mary asks us to give everything to follow Jesus—to perfume the world with love. The Judas tells you to serve yourself and not worry about how it affects others, while the Mary encourages you to love others fiercely and lavishly. Which will we choose to heed?

Thomas Merton wrote, “The spiritual life is first of all a *life*. It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived.” Thinking about life is not living. Thinking about how we would like to love Jesus

is not loving. Mary got it. She was the best disciple of all—she loved Jesus and was not afraid to show the abundance of that love, even though others thought her behavior scandalous and wasting a valuable resource. A fool, really. Kind of like Jesus, who was foolish enough to know the possible fate ahead of him and still turn his face to Jerusalem.

We are all dying, aren't we? How would it be if we recognized this and loved each other extravagantly? Perhaps we would be disciples, as Mary was, and live into this blessing sometimes attributed to the Franciscan order:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace. May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. May the peace of God and the God of peace be with you forevermore. Amen.

The Rev. Danae M. Ashley, MDiv, MA, LMFT is an Episcopal priest and marriage and family therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, Minnesota, and serves as the Associate Rector at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Seattle, and a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle. Danae uses art, music, drama, poetry, and movement in counseling, spiritual direction, and creation of ritual. Her interfaith Clergy Care Circles for therapeutic group spiritual direction directly supports diverse clergy in varied circumstances across the country. She is an alumna of Young Clergy Women International and is a member of Thank God for Sex - promoting healing for those who have shame about their bodies, sexuality, and faith. Danae is also one of the contributors of the book Still a Mother: Journeys through Perinatal Bereavement. Additionally, she produced the play Naming the Un-Named: Stories of Fertility Struggle with playwright Amanda Aikman; has written for Working Preacher: Craft of Preaching; and has been featured on several podcasts regarding fertility struggle and faith. Danae's favorite past times include hiking with her husband and beloved dog, reading, traveling, volunteering as a Master Gardener, dancing with wild abandon to Celtic music, and serious karaoke.