



SERMONS THAT WORK

Monday in Holy Week

Closeness

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

This story of anointing, fragrance, intimacy, and risk – it’s a hard story not to love. And, this year, it seems particularly poignant – a reminder to hold those you love close, for we do not know how much time we have together. This year has been littered with loss and grief – and few, if any, of us had the foresight that Mary did – the foresight to lavish those we adore with our most costly perfume before the time came for us to part.

In our story, Mary has a pound of costly perfume. The gospel says it’s nard, but maybe you could imagine something from your mother’s bathroom counters, one of the heavy glass bottles filled with expensive scent – the kind you weren’t allowed to touch when you were young. Mary takes this expensive bottle and empties it, slathering Jesus’ feet in the scent and leaning in to wipe off the dirt and the excess with her hair.

When we actually consider this – what it would be like to wipe someone’s feet with our hair – we might be horrified. Even without a year of social distancing behind us, this kind of closeness makes us squirm. Mary, though, is so overcome with love for Jesus that she transcends the norms and the barriers, and simply does what she feels is right at that moment. She makes an offering to the Savior she adores.

The disciples see this woman having an incredibly intimate moment with their friend, and they are disgusted. They think she is out of place, that she doesn’t belong where she has put herself. They comment that she is wasting her money, pouring it down the drain by using her perfume for this anointing. This moment must have been uncomfortable for them – the rich smell of the oil is around them, and Mary is kneeling with her face almost touching Jesus’ feet. Jesus puts a stop to their chatter. “Leave her alone,” he says. Jesus takes a moment that is being perceived by the disciples as ugly and makes us see it as beautiful. He ignores their discomfort and blesses this intimate moment. He consecrates it – making it holy and cherished.

In our world, this intimacy is rare, if not impossible, to come by. We are taught from when we are young that everyone has a personal bubble of space around them, and we need to appreciate that. We are not often encouraged to feel the Holy Spirit moving us toward intimate and close moments with friends; we are more often told to suppress that urge, lest we look weird, or out of place, or make someone

uncomfortable. Living through a pandemic that has taught us to observe six feet of social distance has increased our isolation.

This gospel lesson challenges our sense of boundary, inviting us to overcome our fears and offer closeness even in platonic relationships. What would our lives look like if we loved Jesus like Mary did? This love is consuming and abundant – to be so overcome with love as to give away something precious and break the barriers of culture to be drawn into an even deeper and more intimate relationship with God.

Mary was overcome with the sense of needing to do something right now, and she followed her heart. Soon, Jesus would no longer be with the disciples. We are preparing now for Holy Week, preparing for Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. There is no better time than right now to show the people we love not only that we love them – but also the depth of that feeling. We are constantly reminded that life is short, and we are invited today to seize every moment we are gifted, and to turn those moments into sacred beauty by showing intimacy and vulnerability with one another.

The poor will always be with us, Jesus says. Perhaps we can also read this as our distractions, our problems, the difficulties and heartaches of this life will always be with us. But that doesn't mean we can't take the time to focus on one another, to be present and close and abundant and extravagant with our love for one another. Spending time with one another, showing our love, doesn't mean our work is finished. It doesn't mean that our to-do lists are empty, or that everything else is perfect. No – Jesus is blessing the time we spend together, blessing our falling in love with the Christ in one another, and blessing us as we are drawn into an intimate closeness of relationship. We are invited to hear the message of abundance and intimacy that Mary brings. We are invited to fall more deeply in love with Christ.

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