

Wandering Home: Coming Home

Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Texts: Isaiah 43.16-2;
 Psalm 126;
 Philippians 3.4b-14;
 John 12.1-8

I want to name for you this morning some values I have come to appreciate over the years. In fact, some of these are values are embedded a bit into the culture Hope Church but see what you think as I name them. Thoughtful and careful planning; wise and good stewardship; frugality, simplicity, understatement. Do you get the mental picture I am trying to paint here? Does it sound at all familiar to you? In some ways I think of this as being part of the mid-western culture we all live in. So even if this doesn't describe the way you were raised, if you've lived here for any amount of time I suspect you know what I'm talking about.

If I have just described your heart and soul, please hear me when I say I have deep and utter respect for this way of being in the world. Truly. But let's be honest and say that this is not the culture from which we could ever hope to be schooled in the art of the grand gesture. This is not a culture known for its extravagance, for displays of deep emotion or the valuing of the sensual.

Again if I have just described you, I hope you will hold the affirmation I have just named for who you are and how you move through the world because the story we have before us is going to lift up a very different way of being that might push a bit at our comfort zone. The story before us is the ultimate in grand gestures. I suspect that for some us if we were sitting at this table with Mary and with Jesus watching this moment unfold we would have been squirming in our seats just a bit.

Last week we were in the gospel of Luke with the parable of the Prodigal. Today we are in the gospel of John - a different gospel, a different moment.

But the themes between these two texts are striking in their similarity. We call the parable from last week, the prodigal. As many of you know, that word *prodigal* can mean wasteful and reckless and for that reason many of us call it the parable of Prodigal Son. But *prodigal* can also have the meaning of extravagant and so some have come to think of the father as the prodigal in that parable. As the one who shows extravagant joy and love his celebration is prodigal, his love and forgiveness of both of his sons is prodigal.

In that sense, Mary is the prodigal disciple in this story from John. Keep in mind the context here. Mary and Martha and Lazarus are friends of Jesus. Entering into their house is a kind of coming home for Jesus. Lazarus and Mary and Martha are all described in John chapter 11 as ones whom Jesus loves. Jesus weeps when he hears that Lazarus has died. He resuscitates him from the dead. Martha and Jesus engage in this profound conversation about death and eternal life. It is in response to Martha that Jesus makes the declaration "I am the resurrection and the life."¹

These three siblings are kindred spirits for Jesus. They have understood him in ways that so many have not. Mary has heard the rumors circulating about Jesus – the death threats that are being leveled against him. She knows what is coming for him. She can see the suffering that is ahead. Unlike the disciples who will deny Jesus or betray Jesus, Mary is the faithful one. She is the one who looks unflinchingly at his fate and wants to express the depth of her anguish and her love in as tangible a way she can imagine. Everything about this act is unrestrained from the cost of the perfume, the letting down of her hair, to the outpouring of her heart. Nothing is calculated except her desire to care for him and for his body which is about to undergo such deep suffering.

It's only in John's gospel where this moment is recounted as an anointing of Jesus' feet. When the story is told in Matthew and Mark the setting is Simon's home and an unidentified woman anoints Jesus' head. Here in John's gospel it's Mary and it's his feet that she anoints. A commentator I was reading this week points out that it's John's gospel where Jesus gets up

¹ John 11.25

from the Last Supper and washes his disciples' feet. Here Jesus receives that act of service and love that he will then offer on that night to his disciples.² Mary's act of anointing Jesus feet is both a dramatic gesture and a deeply tender moment shared with her friend and teacher.

Last week we lifted up the spirit of joy that comes at the end of the parable of the Prodigal. We connected that spirit of celebration and feasting to the table of our Lord. I invited us to come to the table last Sunday in that spirit of joy and celebration. I made the case that we can come to the table with a spirit of joy despite the backdrop of suffering that we remember when we come. Because we know what it cost Jesus to enter fully into our life and to take on the suffering of this world, we come with hearts that are full of joy and gratitude. The intensity of our joy is connected to our acknowledgment of the intensity of his suffering.

Mary gets this. She understands it. She sees it coming. And she cannot let Jesus walk into that suffering alone. So she does the unthinkable: she takes perfume that costs a year's worth of wages and pours it over his feet. Not for the sake of some showy gesture but because she cannot bear the thought of letting him suffer alone without taking with him that lingering scent – that strong visual and bodily memory of being cared for and adored.

I was thinking of a story that one of our members told me about the time when she lost her son at the prime of his life. I saw her this week and asked if I could share her story here. She told me again how she and her husband rented a large cottage to bring their whole family together in the year before their son died. They wanted a week to just be with him. Not just to surround him in a large group as sometimes happens when a family holds vigil at someone's bedside at the end. But to gather in a beautiful setting before the end where people could share intimate moments with him one-on-one to talk deeply about what was to come and all that they had shared. To shower him with love so that he could hold in his memory this experience of being surrounded by them as he moved into his last days.

² H. Stephen Shoemaker, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 143.

I thought to myself if ever there was a time to be extravagant this is it. Mary – the faithful, prodigal disciple – she gets it. As we stand now one week before Holy Week, as we get ready to walk with Jesus through the suffering Mary was anticipating, I wonder what God has for us to learn. I wonder what we need to receive. Jesus invites us to see him in each other's eyes. If we want to be like Mary and throw decorum and restraint to the wind – to pour ourselves out in the face of Jesus' suffering – then we don't have to look any further than the suffering of those right here, right now. I wonder what it might look like for us to show up for each other like that. I wonder who in your life needs you to surround them with love like that. I wonder who among us in this room right now needs that kind of love and attention.

I wonder what kind of world we could create together if we could value both our sense of thoughtful and careful planning, our good and wise stewardship, our frugal and simple ways with a prodigal's heart (in the best sense of that word) that is moved by the suffering of those around us and willing to throw decorum and restraint aside to show up and surround that suffering with love and with care in the most tangible ways we can imagine. It's a costly way to live. I get that.

Which reminds me of the closing words that are offered every morning at the Iona community where I worshiped during my sabbatical.

I offer these words now as our prayer for blessing:

This is the day that God has made.
We will rejoice and be glad in it.
We will not offer to God
offerings that cost us nothing.
God in peace to love and to serve;
we will seek peace and pursue it.
In the name of the trinity of Love,
God in community, Holy and One. Amen.