

The story of Jesus' anointing is a very personal story for me. As you may know, I grew up faithfully attending church in a quasi-religious family. I heard all the Biblical stories growing up: Creation, Moses and the Red Sea, and, of course, Jesus and his miracles. I don't remember, though, hearing this story until I was older. When I heard it, it had a tremendous impact on my faith. For the first time, I had a story of a woman ministering with Jesus.

There are few stories in scripture about women, even less that are positive. Yet, women are essential to the story of Christ. It is women we find standing at the foot of the cross. The women travel to the tomb on Easter morning. It is a woman, his mother, who brings Christ into the world. These stories made a way for me to understand my vocation and ministry.

Today's Gospel actually begins with another story: the raising of Lazarus. That story begins with Jesus arriving in Bethany four days after Lazarus' death. Here, we are introduced to Martha and Mary.

It is a wild story! And the theological implications are extraordinary. Indeed, the Gospel according to John is explicit about its meaning. Jesus and Martha have a candid conversation to prepare the reader for what is about to happen. Here, Jesus makes clear that the resurrection is not an apocalyptic, future moment. The resurrection, that is the redemptive power of God in our lives, is fully known in Christ. Hence, before Jesus even enters Jerusalem, his incarnation is fully revealed in Lazarus' resurrection.

In John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the hinge between Jesus' life, and death and resurrection. The chief priests and Pharisees understand the political ramifications of this sign. As the crowd begins to worship Jesus, the entire Jewish community grows as a threat to Rome. The authorities worry that the Roman empire will destroy their nation and Temple. They wonder if it is better for Jesus to die than put the whole nation at risk. This is the stage for the passover meal we witness today: the chief priests and Pharisees looking to find Jesus and arrest him.

Consider, then, the atmosphere around today's meal in the Gospel. The risk is real. If the authorities discover Jesus in Bethany, they will arrest him. And, once the chief priests discover that Jesus is with Lazarus, they plan to kill him also. I can imagine that tensions around the table are high. When I think about meals where tensions were high, I remember awkward silence. I wonder about a meal where one or two of those I love the most could be arrested. I can imagine emotions running wide and high, with everyone trying to manage them.

If we have heard anything about Mary prior to today, we must set these assumptions aside. In John's Gospel, she has appeared only one other time. Just before Lazarus is raised from the dead, Mary blames Jesus for his death. Until now, that is their only interaction. And this is the last time Mary will be mentioned. We honestly know nothing about her except these two moments.

Mary enters the room and kneels at Jesus' feet. She has a pound of perfume made from nard, about half a liter. This perfume has a heavy, musky, earthy scent. She washes Jesus' feet with this oil and wipes them with her hair. The Gospel says that the house is filled with the *fragrance of the perfume*.

We know nothing about her motives or desires. Maybe this is an act of gratitude for Lazarus' life. Maybe she's anointing Jesus for his entry into Jerusalem, or even his death and burial. Maybe this is a sign of friendship and love between them. Maybe it's all of those and more. Certainly, it is an intimate, vulnerable act.

I wonder what it would be like to have this kind of relationship with Jesus. Consider, just a moment, foot washing. The soles of our feet are a part of our body few people see or touch: it is either someone we trust the most or someone we're paying to care for our feet. And, even if our feet are misshapen or calloused, most of us have clean feet. I guarantee Jesus' feet were not clean. He was not wearing socks, and maybe not even shoes. He had not had a pedicure. What would inspire us to wash dirty, calloused, smelly feet? And Mary does more than wash Jesus' feet. She uses oil, expensive oil, and her hair. What would have to happen in any relationship to compel us to act as Mary does? Can we imagine kneeling at Jesus' feet, washing them with oil, and drying them with our hair?

It strikes me as important that this scene comes before Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. It is different, obviously. Now, there is perfume and hair. Then, there is water, bowls, and towels. While they are both acts of service, this one feels different. Jesus washing the feet of the disciples is an uncomfortable moment. And, it draws me close to Jesus. Jesus may be the only person I would let wash my feet; indeed, I want him to wash my feet. Meanwhile, Mary washing Jesus' feet with oil and her hair makes me uncomfortable. I want to look away and I can't stop thinking about it. What is the difference between these two moments?

We expect Jesus to serve his disciples. Throughout the Gospel, he calls them friends, loves them, and cares for them. We expect Jesus to be vulnerable and intimate with the disciples. We don't witness the same self-offering to Jesus from the disciples. Yes, they are always with him. And, at no point in the Gospel do they serve him. Mary defies this expectation: she makes an extravagant, intimate, vulnerable offering to Jesus in full view of the community.

Judas' comment here is the ultimate counterpoint to Mary. Rather than emulating Mary's behavior, he reveals his discomfort by criticizing her. Of course, we know that Judas will betray Jesus. Even if we didn't know that, we can sense the falseness of his claims. In the face of Mary's actions, Judas looks rude and crass. He lacks sensitivity and compassion. While Mary is everything a disciple could be, Judas is everything a disciple should not be.

And, I wonder, is it possible that Mary's anointing of Jesus is a way of caring for the poor? Through Christ, she knows that God has come close to her, and she comes close to God. As she anoints Jesus, her actions honor God's reign in him. Here is her king, the incarnate word of God enacting God's reign on earth. Surely this, Christ's reign on earth, is good news for the poor.

Many years ago, this story, Mary anointing Jesus' feet, took root in my heart and grew. To this day, its intimacy, the love and devotion here, invites me close and makes me uncomfortable. To watch Mary anoint Jesus is to witness intimate, vulnerable devotion. I want to have this experience, to come close to God in this way. And, honestly, it makes me uncomfortable because this devotion requires my vulnerability. Am I willing, like Mary, to worship Christ first, before anything else, no matter the risk?

As we come close to Christ today, I wonder how we can serve Him. Where are we being called, right now, to be vulnerable in our devotion in Christ? There are so many ways we can offer ourselves to Christ. And, the heart of discipleship is intimate worship: the offering of ourselves to the ministry and reign of Christ.

May God grant us the courage and strength to make this offering through Christ our Lord. Amen.