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Woman Anointing (John 11:55 – 12:8)

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As far as I can recall, the story of the woman anointing Jesus is the only time the gospels record anyone ministering to him in such a deliberate, initiative taking way. Of course, he has been helped before this. Peter's mother-in-law and Martha have prepared and served meals for him, and a group of unnamed women is remembered as having financially supported him. His male disciples have fetched food for him from villages along the way, and they'll bring the donkey and find a room in which to share their Passover meal. But the episode recorded in tonight's reading seems in a class of its own. It's not routine hospitality or a necessary chore, but a risky, self-implicating act – a gift freely offered to Jesus as he approaches the brink of his own final self-offering. As we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, I'm wondering how this act might teach us about being towards, about leaning into, the events that lie ahead.

Let's start by paying some attention to the density of the story itself. Each of the four gospels has a version of it, though there are significant differences between them. It's always remembered as having happened at a meal. In John, as we just heard, it's at the house of Jesus' friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus; in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, it occurs at the house of Simon the leper; in Luke, it's at Simon the Pharisee's place. So that's interesting – it's a story set variously in the home of friends, the home of an outcast and the home of a semi-hostile authority figure. The woman doing the anointing is also variously identified. According to John, it was Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha; for Matthew and Mark, though it happens when Jesus is in Bethany, the woman is unnamed, and so too for Luke who adds that she is a 'sinner'. Luke's unnamed woman is often then identified with Mary Magdalene – since

traditionally she has been cast in the role of repentant prostitute – despite the fact that there’s no scriptural warrant for this picture of her at all.¹

Importantly, while there’s no mention of the woman’s supposed ‘sinfulness’ in the other gospel accounts, in every version the action of anointing is rendered problematic. In Luke, it’s *because* she’s a sinner, whose touch Jesus should (according to the religious rules) have repudiated. In the other accounts, it’s not her pre-defined sinfulness that’s said to be the problem, but the fact that money spent on the precious ointment could have gone to the poor. There’s grumbling about her extravagance – which itself calls into question her character and judgement, as well as Jesus’. After all, what’s he doing letting this happen, letting this woman of dubious taste if not dubious morality, minister to him in this way?

Among the most important differences between Luke’s version of the story and the other three gospel accounts is its setting in the context of Jesus’ life. Luke narrates the incident as part of Jesus’ public ministry and it becomes another story in a series of teachings and healings. When Jesus defends the woman against the criticism of Simon the Pharisee, he does so by drawing attention to her ‘great love’. For Matthew, Mark and John, however, the incident is chronologically linked to Jesus’ imminent betrayal, trial and crucifixion. In the narrative, it comes just before or just after his entry into Jerusalem. Jesus himself connects it with his death. When he defends the woman against her critics, he says that she has prepared his body for burial.

Now – the variations and elaborations of this incident offer much grist for the biblical scholars’ mill and, no doubt, a few headaches for those inclined to literalism. But it seems to me significant that, in every version of the story, it’s what seems problematic in the woman’s action that gives Jesus the opportunity to invite the grumblers into a different way of seeing. In Luke’s account, he says explicitly to Simon: ‘Do you see this

¹ See Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010).

woman?’ (7:44), and he goes on to open Simon’s eyes to the greatness of her love as compared with Simon’s own rather miserly hospitality. In the other three gospels, it’s similar. Where those around can see only something a bit over the top, extravagant and embarrassing, Jesus receives her ministry as revelatory and prophetic and so invites them to relate to her differently. ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial’ (John 12: 7). So let me explore this a bit more.

I said at the beginning that the story of the woman anointing Jesus is the only time the gospels record anyone ministering to him in such a deliberate, initiative taking way. Listen again to John’s version. ‘Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume’. In other words, she took something almost unimaginably valuable. She anointed the lowest part of Jesus’ body. She wiped his feet with her hair – a movement of profound intimacy and self-abandonment. And then the house is filled with the fragrance of her offering – which recalls the instruction in the Law that anyone who presents a grain offering to the Lord, shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it, so that when it is burnt on the altar it becomes ‘an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord’ (Lev. 2:2).

Those around couldn’t see what she was doing. ‘Mary’s almost indecorous devotion to Jesus seems to me’, writes one rather uptight contemporary biblical commentator, ‘a little “Pentecostal” or “charismatic”’: her stooped body, cascading hair, and poured out oil seem the equivalent of gospel choruses rather than of classic hymns ... of emotion rather than reserve’. He concedes, this commentator, that the ‘text teaches emotion-suspicious persons like myself to ‘have a heart!’ and that we ‘colder types should give people a little space’ yet he concludes, ‘Not too much, surely’!² His response is, I imagine, not far from the patriarchal and cultured distaste with which

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), p.700.

many around her regarded this woman, this Mary – no matter how they rationalized their reaction with reference to the needs of the poor.

But Jesus sees way beyond an easy dismissal of her and her action as hyper-emotional and effectively hysterical. He sees deeper. She has abandoned her dignity and status; of her own free-will, she has risked profound rejection and misunderstanding. It's as if she alone has recognized the radical extent of Jesus' self-giving to an unworthy and uncomprehending humanity, and this recognition has drawn from her an answering responsiveness – which is itself Christ-like, self-emptying. She gives herself utterly to him, and in doing so she gives him to himself – 'I see you'; 'Namaste'.

The oil she pours out so extravagantly represents, as many of the commentaries point out, anointing for kingship as well as anointing for burial. Maybe it's also anointing as balm – the healing touch of being seen. In that moment, it seems, she is participating *with him* in the ministry of reconciliation, enabling it, empowering it – and that is ministry indeed. No wonder, as Matthew and Mark have it, Jesus raises her up against those who would bring her down: 'Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her' (Mark 14: 9). And notice the Eucharistic echo in those words.

With Jesus, we too are drawing closer to the end of the journey – the shadow of his suffering and death begins to fall across our days. Next week, we celebrate the entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of Holy Week. This unnamed woman, this Mary, shows us how we too may participate in what Jesus is doing – then as now. We are to give up our attachment to status and self-importance; we are to be with him in such a way as to become like him. And we're to dare believe that we too have a share in this ministry of reconciliation – ministry embodied and lived out as love and self-gift.