

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 25, 2007 –

Text: John 12:1-8

Pr. Robert Goldstein

“Pour It On, Mary. Pour It On!”

Whatever possessed Mary, Lazarus' and Martha's sister, to take a pound of expensive cream perfume, rub it lavishly on Jesus' feet and then wipe his feet with her hair? As Blanche Devereux of the Golden Girls would say, "Kinky!"

But was it? And what does it mean for us?

First of all we know that Jesus and some of his disciples have been invited to dinner at Lazarus' house in Bethany. Now such a dinner in that cultural setting had two stages. First, the guests' were provided a towel and dish of water to wash their feet and their hands. Sometimes the water was perfumed, or perfumed oil was also provided. The guests were expected to wash themselves or, in upper class circles, a slave would be relegated to the task. After that, the second stage of the dinner began with the festive meal as people reclined on pillows around a table.

We can relate to the washing of hands before dinner. But to understand the washing of feet we need to bear in mind that people in that time wore open sandals and no socks in a dusty or muddy climate. We usually wear shoes and socks so the whole idea of washing of feet as a mark of hospitality is lost on us. (Incidentally, the Worship Team and I have moved from footwashing on Maundy Thursday to hand washing. Why have a ritual of footwashing that has no cultural meaning to us –other than liturgical custom? But having the pastor humbly washing your hands makes Jesus' footwashing point quite well –that like our parents or a nurse in the hospital, I wash your hands as your servant not as some lord.) Anyway, enough of that –back to the action.

What takes place in Bethany is at the first stage of the dinner. As usual Martha is busy in the kitchen and Lazarus is entertaining the guests –as the towels and water are gathered. Perhaps Mary was assigned to do that while her sister prepared the meal.

Anyway, Mary breaks all convention and brings out that costly perfume either after the usual cleansing of feet and hands was done or in place of it. Regardless, by rubbing the ointment on Jesus' feet herself, she breaks another convention of touching his body –a very big taboo. In that puritanical culture only immoral parties would have immoral women like that, so it must have made some of his disciples uncomfortable with the implications of improper intimacy. And sure enough Judas Iscariot is just that person.

I like Mary because she doesn't go for half measures. She gets down on her knees beside the reclined Jesus and uses her long beautiful head of hair to wipe Jesus' feet clean. Now that's really over the edge to the disciples and it is hard to see that it is not erotic. Wait to Jerry Falwell and the Colorado Springs crowd get a hold of this! Erotica in the Bible! Ever read Song of Solomon?

But there is more. Whatever possessed Mary to do this? Adoration –pure adoration of Jesus as in the words of St. Paul in the second reading, *“I want to know Christ and the power of Christ’s resurrection!”* Mary adores Jesus and lavishly and boldly shows it –breaking huge social conventions. We, if we want to know Christ and the power of Christ’s resurrection, must also be prepared to lavish a love on Christ as she. And as Holy Week looms upon us, we are placed in an opportune position to explore and garner that lavish love and adoration for Christ in ourselves.

The three days of Holy Week are so poorly attended –but why not see these rare annual services as an opportunity for you to deepen your soul and your spirit with Christ’s love that, in turn, incubates in you a rich love for Christ and therefore for the whole world? The whole notion of hospitality in a church is not some gimmick or niceness, but flows like living water from such an adoration as Mary’s.

But there is more. Mary adores Jesus, but Martha’s in the kitchen. Martha is so task oriented. Mary just isn’t. And to heighten the contrast, add Judas’ practical judgment, *“Why was this perfume not sold for a year’s salary and the money given to the poor?”* Judas has a point –and the contrast between Mary and Judas leads me to this observation:

Every church I have served is populated by those whose outlook on life inhabit a spectrum from the adoring to the practical. Take worship. Some of you are very task oriented like Martha and Judas: the shorter the service the better. *“I come to get a message to take home with me.”* Some are like Mary: the richer the service in ritual, music and color the better. *“It’s the experience of the adoration that is important to me. Time stands still.”* As your pastor I try to keep a balance on this spectrum and I cannot please those at either end. We have to learn to compromise in the Spirit.

Clearly the Gospel reading has Jesus siding with the adoration. *“Leave her alone. She bought the perfume so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”* Jesus is telling us here to look toward that holiest of weeks in the Christian calendar: Mary’s lavish, erotic and taboo-breaking behavior shows the kind of adoration that will be needed to weather the perfect storm only Jesus realizes is ahead, a storm that is going to kill him and scatter them.

Mary, whose unmistakable deep and lavish adoration for Christ, her hunger to know Christ and the meaning of Christ for her life, this Mary will be numbered among the first to rally the more practical but dispirited disciples to the resurrection. From such adoration a new community emerges that lives out that adoration with deep compassion for the poor and the marginalized.

And what of the super righteous Judas Iscariot? Well, sadly his lot in life is to show that religion has to have devotion and adoration at its core or it has no moral compass. So think about your life and what is at the core of your life. Think about how attention to these three days –Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil, once a year in Holy Week, can nurture your soul, your spirit. Be more than practical. Plan now to lay aside those days and that trip into of adoration. That’s the future for the post-modern church.

Hey, you might find yourself lavishly lathering adoration on Christ and opening your heart to greater hospitality –a hospitality that even breaks San Francisco respectabilities. Pour it on Mary! Pour it on! Amen