

PENTECOST III

A woman of the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the oil. Luke 7:37

Feet, tears, hair. Kisses, skin and love. Perfume, sin and forgiveness. The woman who anoints Jesus.

For decades, our lectionary readings virtually ignored her, although she appears in all four gospels. We heard about her merely on Holy Monday, a day that only the very very faithful tend to attend church. But in the revised lectionary she's all over, it seems. She appeared in the Gospel from Mark last fall when Jep Streit came to preach, and here she is again, in Luke.

A couple of weeks ago, some of us were talking at coffee hour about how stories got included in the gospels. One way, we said, was the oddity test. This may seem counterintuitive. But Biblical historians figure that if a gospel story seems exceptionally strange and inexplicable, it probably really happened; that is, it was so authentic the creators of the gospels *had* to leave it in.

The story of the woman who anoints Jesus is such a story. A very, very strange story indeed.

Most of you know that I love this woman. I love her so much I've written a book of poems about her. I think about her often, always with new dimensions, new insights.

I prefer the version in Mark, the oldest, the original version, which tells us nothing about the woman, not her identity, not her motivation, nothing. Matthew follows that tradition. But even they, who keep her nameless and featureless, attach to her story a moral about the poor: *the poor you shall have always with you.*

The writer of John's gospel turns her into Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus, a good friend of Jesus, and thus eliminates all mystery from the account. If she's Mary of Bethany, of course we understand her love for Jesus and sorrow at his impending death.

Luke, whose version we hear today, keeps her nameless. But something odd and unfortunate has happened over the years. If you mention *the woman who anoints Jesus*, most people who have any idea about her say, *Oh, Mary Magdalene.*

But this woman and Magdalene are not the same. Luke calls this woman, a *woman in the city, a sinner*. Magdalene does not appear until Luke's next chapter, when a number of women are listed as following Jesus. Luke tells us *that Magdalene had had seven demons cast out* of her, but he does not identify her as the woman of the city.

So later interpretation and legend has melded the two; the woman who anoints Jesus has become, in the popular mind, one with Magdalene. Why?

I blame the Greeks. The Greeks, and Gnostic thinking, both of which have burdened with the legacy of a body/spirit split, the conviction that the spirit is pure and holy, while the flesh is the source of sin, evil, and misery. And I blame Paul, of course, who had all kinds of problems with the body.

That was not the general Jewish way of thinking. Nor was it Jesus' way. Jesus has some harsh things to say about the body. But he saves his severest scorn and judgment for wrong ways of thinking: for prejudice, oppression, and injustices of every kind.

Biblical "fundamentalists" to the contrary, Jesus has little or nothing to say about sex. Nothing about homosexuality. Nothing about fornication. He condemns divorce because it renders women paupers and outcasts, and advises those who condemn an adulteress not to cast the first stone.

Jesus, as he appears in the gospels, is not anti-flesh, not anti-sex. Not anti-sensuality, anti-passion. These were not, as we say, his *issues*. Not at all.

But they became the issues of later Christianity, heavily influenced by Greek ideas and the flesh/spirit dualism. And so this woman of Luke's, uninhibitedly using her hair and her tears to lavish love upon Jesus, becomes an embarrassment. A scandal.

So, what to do with her? Oh, well, here comes Mary Magdalene, who had seven demons. Maybe those demons were demons of sex, of lust, of fleshly passion. Let's make this bold, shameless, transgressive woman with the tears and perfume, the same as Magdalene. That will explain them both. Explain them both away, really.

But if we read Luke as written, we can't explain the woman away; Luke writes her as emotional and lushly sensuous. Luke writes her as all body and feeling. Her extravagance may be born of grief and gratitude, but that doesn't diminish its sumptuous sensuality. That luxuriant hair. Those copious, unrestrained tears and kisses. That passion.

One male commentator on this passage thinks that the scene “exhibits a touch of hysteria” on the part of the woman who seems unable “to express her self knowledge intellectually.” A feminist critique claims that the prophetic power of the woman’s role as Mark portrays it is lost in Luke, “reduced to a display of unusual affection on the part of an intruding woman.” Bother those intruding women!

This is a weird feminist position, I have to say. How have women gotten anywhere in the world, bible or elsewhere, without intruding? When were we ever invited? When did we *not* have to bust in?

I still tend to prefer Mark’s version, the most stark, the most mysterious. But as I have reflected here on Luke’s account, I am able to see his version, his vision, as the least domesticated of the four gospelists’.

Sure, Luke does bring in a moral about forgiveness. But as so often, Jesus upends conventional moral expectation. He says, *the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little*. Jesus doesn’t say, *she loves well, so I have forgiven her. Her love makes her forgivable*. He says, *she has been forgiven, so she loves greatly*.

Love doesn’t earn forgiveness. Rather, forgiveness creates love. Being forgiven doesn’t erase this woman’s passion; to the contrary, her passion increases with her sense of God’s mercy, God’s freedom.

Love, passion, are highlighted here as fruits of forgiveness and the freedom that comes with it. Passion is incarnate in the woman’s extravagant devotion to Jesus’ body. Her care of him, in this account of Luke’s, is sacramental.

All four portraits of the woman who anoints Jesus reveal a woman who senses a need of Jesus’ that none of his intimates grasp. Mark, Matthew, and Luke place this story near the end of their gospels, shortly before Jesus is arrested. Thus the anointing becomes a prophetic act foreshadowing his death, and the custom in the ancient world of anointing a dead body to overcome the odor of fleshly decomposition. In versions where she anoints his head as well as his feet, the act is seen as recognition of his Messiahship; king’s heads were anointed when they ascended to their thrones.

Luke puts the story much earlier in his gospel, early in Jesus’ public ministry. In this editorial decision, Luke loses, perhaps, the woman’s dimension as a prophet of Jesus death and kingship, her intuitive grasp of his divine nature and destiny.

But Luke's woman intuitively senses something else, prophesies another truth. Jesus is *human*. He has human needs, bodily needs. Like all of us, he needs to be touched, to be ministered to in the flesh as well as in the spirit.

We all know about infants in institutions who fail to thrive because of their lack of contact with human touch, human flesh, human warmth. Often, such infants fail to thrive as adults as well, they become isolates, sociopaths sometimes. We all need touch, embrace, tender care.

That's what Luke's woman knows. She walks in to a roomful of strangers, she approaches a stranger whose need has somehow been manifest to her, and offers him, without restraint or explanation, her loving touch, her bodily devotion, her sacramental passion.

Here's one of my poems.

What I Could

I did wordlessly
beside him, took his cold
dusty feet in my lap
 massaged firmly, with purpose.
My hands, my fingers were made
for this
 intent and focus –
one work of probing, a small bone
broken long ago, comfort
 kneading heel, ball, arch,
between each toe, finding at last
that knot
 of relief, release, silt
of some ancient wound or grief
stored
 for a lifetime.
He sighed, as wind comes
 moaning among stones.

What I could I did–

everything, but not enough.

Amen