

Experiencing Reality in a Symbol

A sermon in the Lenten series “Reading Between the Lines”

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John 12:1-8 (CEB) ¹Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. ³Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus’ feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. ⁴Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, ⁵“This perfume was worth a year’s wages! Why wasn’t it sold and the money given to the poor?” (⁶He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.) ⁷Then Jesus said, “Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you won’t always have me.”

In our day we don’t get the whole “anointing” thing.

Sure, we’ve heard of it. We just aren’t experienced with it. The Old Testament book of Leviticus describes Moses following God’s command to set aside his brother Aaron for priestly duties by pouring oil on his head “to consecrate him.”¹ That’s what they *used* to do. But when I was ordained to the gospel ministry, there was never a suggestion that someone should pour oil on my head—even when I did have hair.

Our Call to Worship a moment ago was from Psalm 133. Listen again to what Psalm 133 says about anointing as a metaphor for respectful, peaceful co-existence:

*¹ How good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity!
² It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron’s beard,
down on the collar of his robe.*

I don’t know about you, but feeling oil running down my cheek and dripping down my neck wouldn’t make me feel especially calm or welcomed or thankful. The act of anointing is a relic of ancient times that most of us probably would agree should stay there. The closest we come to anointing today is when we baptize with some drops of water on the forehead, or perhaps when we receive the mark of ashes on Ash Wednesday.

But in the ancient world, anointing was not at all unusual. In Jewish and pagan cultures alike, it was customary to refresh guests at banquets by pouring cool and

¹ Leviticus 8:12

fragrant ointment on their heads.² I suppose that gesture is not unlike the hospitality you experience on those long international flights when the cabin crew offers you a hot towel to refresh yourself just prior to landing.

Today's scripture reading from the Fourth Gospel focuses on an anointing – an unusual anointing – that took place at a dinner party at a private home in Bethany. Bethany was a village on the Mount of Olives just east of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple. Bethany was the home of some close friends of Jesus: sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. If Jesus was near Bethany, you can bet that he'd stop in for a visit there.

Today's passage from John's gospel reminds us that Lazarus was the man Jesus had recently raised from death to life. Apparently that act caused many fellow Jews to put their faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah or Savior. The Temple's highest court of elders (the Sanhedrin) had taken notice of their new allegiance to Jesus and considered it a defection. They saw Jesus as an unorthodox rabbi who was damaging the integrity of the Jewish faith. In the verses preceding today's scripture reading the council of religious leaders had decided that Jesus needed to be eliminated... killed. Jesus heard about it. He already knew he didn't have much time. But this new "credible threat" simply intensified his sense of urgency.

On this day Jesus attended the dinner party. We can be sure that he and the other guests had their feet washed for them when they arrived; that was standard Middle Eastern hospitality since city streets and village paths were the usual depository for animal and human waste. As they took their places for dinner – sitting on the floor or propping themselves on one elbow – the dinner guests very well may have had their heads anointed: a small measure of fragrant oil or water would be touched to their foreheads as a sign of welcome and respect.

As Martha served her brother Lazarus, their friend Jesus, and the other guests, Martha's sister Mary entered the room and kneeled at the feet of Jesus. She produced a flask of aromatic oil made from nard and poured it all over the feet of Jesus. Nard or "spikenard" is "a fragrant oil derived from the root... of the nard plant which grows in the mountains of northern India."³ (It's similar to honeysuckle.) Nard was often used to prepare corpses for burial, its strong fragrance serving a practical purpose. It was very expensive.

Mary poured out more than a pint of the stuff on the feet of Jesus, then undid her hair and used it to towel off the excess. If that idea shocks you, consider this: Jewish women didn't let down their hair in public because to do so would signal a

² Anointing (2) - Hastings' Dictionary of the New Testament - (studylight.org) accessed 3/23/2022

³ Raymond E. Brown, S.S.. The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John (I-XII). Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966, 448.

questionable morality. But Mary was willing to risk raising eyebrows in order to carry out this symbolic act of devotion.

Judas Iscariot immediately objected to this action, not because he disapproved of Mary's reputation. John's gospel explains to the reader that Judas will later betray Jesus. To advance his bad reputation, the gospel states that Judas was the business manager for the disciples but often helped himself to the offerings they received. Judas claimed that the nard was being wasted on anointing the feet of Jesus and should have been sold to raise money to help poor people (or himself).

Actually, there was a reason for Judas to object. After all, back then who anointed *feet*? Hosts would anoint their guests' *heads*, and they would have their guests' feet *washed*, but no one anointed their guests' *feet*.

But Mary was not performing an act of hospitality. She was performing a prophetic act of reverence. Let me explain. The only time *feet* would be anointed would be when preparing a body for burial.⁴ The whole body would be washed, then anointed. Anointing the feet of Jesus was symbolic of anointing his whole body, and anointing his whole body would be a sign of preparing for his death and burial. Mary knew of the threat on Jesus' life; everyone knew. She knew his time was limited, that (as the Bible says) his "hour has come."⁵ Mary was using this stirring act of service to demonstrate her appreciation, her affection, her love for Jesus her Lord who would become her Savior. "While the Sanhedrin [was] plotting Jesus' death (11:53), Mary's symbolic act is preparing him for death."⁶

In a moment we will engage in a symbolic act of reverence and commitment when we become guests at our Lord's Table. The token bits of food we will receive aren't intended to fuel our bodies for the work of the day. The bit of bread, the sip from the cup are symbols—they're symbols of the work and the life, the body and the blood of Jesus of Nazareth. He invites us to take them into ourselves as a symbol of our desire to take on the work and the life of Jesus in our world, in our day, in the ways God makes possible for us.

The act of sharing in the Lord's Supper is symbolic, shared using symbols of his physical body, shared as we gather symbolically around a table where he is host. But even in the symbol we discover a reality. For our symbolic action teaches us to share with one another. And that action trains us to share ourselves with the world in the name of Jesus. Amen—may it be so!

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John (I-XII). Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966, 454.

⁵ John 17:1

⁶ James McPolin, S.J., John. Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1979, 165.