

John 12:1-8

In the midst of the ugliness and hostility plotted against Jesus by the powers that be, common folk like Mary and Martha show hospitality to Jesus and recognize in him the Messiah. Apparently Mary and Martha are not guided by the decisions of religious authorities. They have experienced the love of Jesus and in response are reciprocating that love. In fact, their devotion takes on added significance when we remember that it is in the midst of plans by the Sanhedrin to destroy not only Jesus but also their brother Lazarus. How determined are we to remain spiritually committed when the prevailing sentiment in the culture at large may run counter to it?

Mary's devotion to Jesus, however, is not an arrogant, "in your face" type of demonstration against religious authorities. In humility she pours the ointment on the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair. Perhaps John understands Mary to feel unworthy to pour the ointment on the head of Jesus. She submits herself to the loving power and authority of Jesus as Lord and Messiah. We do not find in her the future triumphalism of a dominant Christendom that would at times assert its power against unbelievers in the same manner that the Sanhedrin did against Jesus and Lazarus. How ironic that even the cross of Jesus at times has been used in the history of the church to communicate a triumphalistic message of dominance in complete negation of what it meant originally in the life of Jesus.

Another issue for preaching that this passage raises is the total abandon and extravagance with which Mary responds to Jesus. She literally "wastes" \$12,000 (the value calculated at \$ 5 per day wage for one year) on Jesus! Mary and Martha have experienced the anguish of losing their brother and then the joy of gaining him back through the abundant love of Jesus for them. When one has gone through that kind of death and resurrection, nothing else matters. It is the Johannine equivalent of the Matthean parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl. The kingdom of God is like the case of a laborer who having found a treasure in the field, in his joy goes and sells everything he has and buys the field; or like the merchant who having found a pearl of great price, goes and sells everything and buys the pearl (Matthew 13:44-46). No cost is too much.

Yes, but what about the poor? The passage makes clear that in our kind of world we will never be able to solve the problem of poverty once and for all through economic reform or political action--"you always have the poor with you." The proper place to begin is a profound understanding of the incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt in this world with all its woes, sin, and darkness. In turn, those of us who have responded to God's revelation in Christ are to become the incarnation of God's love in this world. But we cannot do that until we have come to understand and experience the life and love of God revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our concern for the poor must be rooted in incarnational theology. That means that our task is not finished when we have given away food baskets at Thanksgiving and Christmas, or have donated used clothing to Habitat for Humanity. If the incarnation is taken seriously as a paradigm, it means that we live our whole life with the understanding that we have been called to a life of suffering servanthood in behalf of a needy world. That may mean different things to different people in concrete situations. Sometimes it means Mother Teresa ministering to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. At other times it means living a simpler lifestyle to be able to share our goods with those who are less fortunate. There is no single action that can be claimed as the exclusive embodiment of Christ in the world. Perhaps Christ becomes flesh in our world in a variety of ways as long as there are people who make themselves available to God for that purpose.

A further point in the passage that cries out for proclamation is what Jesus does to defend Mary against accusations and innuendoes brought against her by Judas. Jesus gives to her action a more profound meaning than what she may have had in mind. In other words, Jesus looks beyond the outward act and sees her heart and comes to her defense when others seem to be much less charitable. Mary has not stopped to resolve the issue of poverty in the world. She has one supreme desire: how to express her love for Jesus. Jesus sees that and affirms her. Maybe we do not have to get everything right before the Lord accepts us or looks on us with favor. Maybe God looks at the intention of the heart rather than the outward performance. Jesus sees more in Mary's action than perhaps what she herself was able to see. Here indeed is grace at work. When Judas points out Mary's failure, Jesus affirms her extravagant love.