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The Poetry of the Mysterious

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John 12.1-8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, to the home of Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with Jesus. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief who kept the common purse and stole from it). Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Tao Te Ching 29

*Do you want to improve the world?
I don't think it can be done.
The world is sacred.
It can't be improved.
If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it.
If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it.
There is a time for being ahead,
a time for being behind;
a time for being in motion,
a time for being at rest;
a time for being vigorous,
a time for being exhausted;
a time for being safe,
a time for being in danger.
The Master sees things as they are,
without trying to control them.
She lets them go their own way,
and resides at the center of the circle.*

It is rare, reminds Will Willimon, that reality is simple, flat, non-conflicted. Things are usually not as they seem. Life is often evaluated and lived in a reductionist mentality, hoping that the world might be simpler than it really is. Most of us would like a three-step plan for living easily, or to uncover one all-encompassing explanation or to live in declarative sentences that end with exclamation points. Life, however, is more often lived with question marks and parables than with formulas and quantifiable data.

Reality is ambiguous, uncertain, mysterious and therefore best described by poetry, Willimon says. If we are going to find out something really significant about ourselves we had best use art rather than the scientific method. Irony is more true to life than the Periodic Tables of the Elements because things are hardly ever as they first appear. We do not like this. We push back against it. We want assurances; we want statistics; we want hard evidence of life's meaning, its purpose and its longevity. But our ability to control is merely an illusion, as the Tao says.

Against that backdrop, then, we come to this story in John's gospel where the clash between the pragmatic and the artistic reverberate to the present day. We are shocked at Jesus's reaction to the incident that occurred even as we are dismayed with the ambiguity of his response. We want something tangible to hold on to but all we get is an invitation to faith.

The scene takes place a week before Jesus is to enter into Jerusalem where he knows the authorities are waiting to murder him. He is visiting his good friends Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, the man Jesus raised from the dead not long before this. You remember in that story that by the time Jesus arrived at the tomb where Lazarus had been buried, it had been several days since his death, and his decaying body polluted the air behind the stone that sealed off the tomb. Even so, Jesus rolled away the stone from Lazarus's tomb, and the tomb became a womb from which Lazarus stepped forth into new life. The irony here, of course, is that Jesus would be the one in the tomb before too many more days went by. When the rulers of the Sanhedrin, the guardians of the religious status quo, got wind of this (that is of Jesus's bringing a dead corpse back to life in God's name, not Lazarus's stinking body) they plotted to kill him, thinking that would end it. It was too much life for them.

Religion is all too often about making the world in our image rather than accepting it for what it is. Organized religion is too often about control over the mysterious unknown, about managing what isn't understood, and condemning what is feared. In this is quantifiable power. And in tampering with it, in making life an object, as the Tao says, we ruin it. The Sanhedrin thought they could squelch it by killing Jesus, but they were in for the surprise we now call Easter.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus, on the other hand, are all so grateful for Jesus's death-defying activity on their behalf that they've invited friends and relatives for an extravagant dinner. Martha, ever the pragmatic one, is serving and Jesus is the honored guest. Lazarus sits near his friend Jesus, unaware of the trade that has occurred, for by returning to Bethany to see them, Jesus knows he will die, trading his life for the life of his friend Lazarus. Ironic, isn't it that the deceased Lazarus will outlive the savior Jesus of Nazareth. Mary, never the practical one, unwittingly sets off a firestorm when she anoints Jesus's feet with a vial of very expensive oil, and then lets her hair down, which meant the same thing then as it does now, and wipes Jesus's feet with it. It was an obscene scene. A nice dinner party gets all messed up because Jesus is there; the erotic was mixed up with the domestic, the pragmatic gets mixed up with the ambiguous, death gets mixed up with life, and the conflict is on its way to a showdown.

Judas is here, surprisingly, acting as a literary foil, as John is wont to do in his gospel, playing devil's advocate to Jesus's miracle worker. Judas is Mr. Propriety, Mr. Bleeding Heart Liberal, Mr. President of Amnesty International, and he takes issue with Mary's extravagant use of this expensive oil. It was worth a year's wages, this perfume she so sensuously and seemingly carelessly poured out. At this point in the story, we chime in with Judas. "Yes, why *wasn't* this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" And we would think that the Jesus we've come to know as the supreme advocate for the poor and hungry would certainly have taken up Judas's cause. But he doesn't. He, in fact, chides Judas for his false religious piety, for Jesus knows the motives behind his desire to control, and manipulate and craft religion for his own benefit. "Leave her alone," Jesus says. "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me."

Now it must be mentioned that one didn't anoint the feet of living people in those days, especially with expensive perfume. You anointed other parts of the body but feet were anointed only on a body already dead, in preparation for burial. Mary is treating Jesus, the man who gave her brother life, like he was a dead man, which for all practical purpose he was. The Sanhedrin will soon have their way with him for messing up their reality by bringing life out of death. And the holy irony is that by coming to give life to Lazarus, Jesus is giving up his own life. The giver of life is being prepared for death. Here is the poetry of the mysterious at its best.

And only with irony can Jesus make the point that we do not always have him. He is not containable like our organized religions. He is not predictable; he cannot be domesticated and formed in our image; he cannot be our personal magician to do our every bidding. With Jesus, we are always dancing on the edge of life, messily mixing life and death, extravagance and poverty, the erotic and the chaste, the unknowing of the present with revelation of the future. By a power that transcends our own, our little deeds toward him, like Mary's anointing, have deeper meaning than we intend, for we are in some mysterious, enigmatic way caught up in the larger purposes of God. And it is hard for us to know whether or not what we do in his name are deeds of extravagant love or merely a sinful waste. We do not have Jesus. We do not have answers. All we have is questions and all we can do is live into the best of what God has for us to do.

Jesus said earlier in John's gospel that he is "the way, the truth and the life, and that no one comes to God except through him." And it's pretty much true that no one comes to God except by way of the ambiguous, conflicted, extravagant, messy, deadly, life-giving way. Ironic, isn't it? And pure poetry. No scientific data or religious certainty can explain it. We cannot have Jesus in the sense of his protection or his guarantees; rather, we are asked to invite him to sit at table with us, grateful for the example he showed of how we can get through all of the messy parts of life and death and find life on the other side. Not in heaven, but now.

And yes, we will always have the poor with us because of our selfishness, our greed, our oppressive systems, our insensitivity, our prejudice and our condescension. Jesus pretty much nails us to the cross on this one.

Jesus consoles us with the poetry of the mysterious. It is the unknown, the mystical, the uncontrollable, the questions and the ambiguous that the poetry of faith affirms. Faith, by its own definition, doesn't give us certainties or guarantees but rather stories, metaphors and mystery. Jesus is as much a mystery now as he was in John's gospel. Religion has tried to capture him, encapsulate him in creeds and dogma, to quantify him. But he will not be kept in the tomb of those deadly quantifiers. It is only through the poetic mystery that he will be known during the good times and the

difficult times, raising us up to new life, eating with us wherever and whenever and with whomever, as the choir sang this morning; evading description and definition but always present at the center of the circle that is life. There are no requirements or rules for finding him; he just shows up and when he does, there is always a party.

--Gary L. McCann

(Thanks to the Rev. Dr. William Willimon for the ideas expressed in this sermon)