

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon

Date: 7 April 2019

Lesson: John 12:1-8

---

Word has been spreading quickly about something that Jesus did. The authorities catch wind of it and they recognize that people are now flocking to Jesus. What did he do? He raised Lazarus from the dead. According to John's gospel, it was this event and the clamor of the people that greatly disturbed the authorities. It concerned them so much that they began to plot how to get rid of Jesus and kill Lazarus... for good this time.

All of this is the backdrop to our reading today from the 12th chapter. This chapter is a turning point for John's gospel: right after today's gospel reading, Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem. People from outside of Judaism begin to inquire about him. He goes into hiding until his arrest. This 12th chapter is also a turning point theologically, too. Up until now, Jesus has been saying that his "hour has not yet arrived." But immediately after the narrative we read today, Jesus says, "my hour has come." So what is going on in today's story that is a part of this significant turn in the gospel? Is this merely a story of anointing Jesus's feet and then some dialogue with Judas, or is more taking place here?

The characters in today's story are Jesus, Judas, and the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Judas and Jesus are the only characters who speak, but we are told what the others are doing: Martha is serving, Lazarus reclines with Jesus at the table, and Mary's action is given the brightest spotlight: she takes expensive perfume, pours it over Jesus' feet, and wipes those feet with her hair: Love, devotion, and deepest appreciation for the friend who raised her brother. Mary doesn't explain herself with words. She doesn't mention the expense of the perfume prior to offering this gift. She quietly washes his feet. Anointing Jesus. This act was simply her way of showing love.

Jesus is the one who associates Mary's action with the preparation for burial. In the Jewish culture of that age, anointing with oil was primarily associated with two acts. The first was that bodies were anointed with oil prior to burial rituals. The second was that oil was used to anoint kings at their coronation. In the chapters that follow this story, John routinely references the kingship of Christ. John points to the cross and says that Christ ascends to there in order to claim his glory and power, like a king ascending to the throne.

So is Mary's anointing of Jesus a sign of preparation for his burial or is it a sign of his coronation? Jesus explicitly mentions the burial, but the beauty of John's gospel is that this anointing is a sign of both burial and coronation. His hour has finally arrived, so Jesus is anointed. We should see it as a sign that he is now entering into his death and that he is now entering into his glory, both by way of the cross. Yet Mary probably didn't understand the full significance of this anointing. For her, it was a silent display of her love, devotion, and appreciation. Actions speak louder than words, they say.

The week ahead would take Jesus through immeasurable pain and suffering, and I imagine that Mary's actions at this table spoke more to Jesus than the words of any burial liturgy or coronation liturgy ever could. Jesus knew that he came to give his life. He knew that he would ascend to his place of glory and power. But it was still going to take a cross. It would require his death by crucifixion. And that is a horrifying thought for anyone to contemplate. That the future awaiting you -- what you were meant to fulfill -- is filled with anguish.

Yet, for someone facing a future like this, an act of pure love can be extremely empowering. An act of love can bring encouragement. It might come with no words attached to it, but that act of love can help someone get through the job that must be done. The Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis says, "Jesus needed Mary's love as much as she needed to show Jesus how much she loved him. That's pretty much how love works. How relationships work. Because, here's the thing. To what extent you cannot do what you need to do, have to

do, even want to do, [in those times you need] another saying, ‘yes, you can do this;’ [in those times you need] another loving you into your future.”

Have you ever experienced that? The experience of needing someone to love you into your future that is uncertain, perhaps a future that is even guaranteed to bring suffering? Jesus needed that. He very well may have been the only one who knew what was in store during the next week, so words of “you have nothing to worry about” and “keep your chin up” were not going to help. It could only be an act of pure love -- an abundant love; a love that had a fragrance strong enough to linger with him throughout the worst times of those coming days -- it is only this act that Mary did that could love him into and through his future. Her actions indeed spoke louder than words.

In this story, it is interesting that -- besides Jesus -- the only other spoken words come from Judas’ mouth. And they are the right words! Yes, the money could have been given to the poor instead. However, that is for nought because Judas’ words do not align with his heart. On the other hand, we have Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They say no words, but we are given verbs to describe their actions. Mary anoints and dries his feet. Martha serves. Lazarus reclines with Jesus at the table. In the next chapter, Jesus says to his disciples, “I... have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” It is the same verb of Mary’s action. Jesus then tells his disciples that this is an example for them to follow, it is something that Mary has already done. Martha serves. Later in this chapter Jesus uses that same verb when he tell his disciples, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” This display of discipleship has already been done by Martha. Lazarus is one of those who reclines at the table with Jesus. In the next chapter, it is the disciples are described the same way -- reclining at the table with Jesus -- when Jesus tells them they will be known as his disciples by their love for one another. All of these are examples of how Jesus says his disciples will be known: meeting him at the table, loving one another, serving others, washing the feet of others.

The gospel writer wants us to see in today's lesson that discipleship in Christ's name is best witnessed in the actions of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, not in the empty words of Judas. Faith that is enacted bears more weight than faith that just happens to use the right words. The actions of these siblings speak louder than the words of Judas.

I can't point out exactly when or how it began, but Christianity has long had a tendency to define discipleship by the words that we speak. "Do you subscribe to the right doctrine or to a heretical teaching?" Even today, it is said that what matters most is "belief in Jesus," which is often code for having a conscious, doctrinal understanding of him. It's basically a checklist of saying what should be said and not saying what shouldn't be said. To make myself understood: it's not a bad thing to have a clear and faithful articulation of what we believe. We just shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that having the right words encompasses the entirety of what faithful discipleship looks like. Because we know even Judas said the right words, but his heart was elsewhere. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus say no words at all today, but their actions all fit Jesus' definitions of faithful discipleship.

So what does that mean for us at All Saints? As a Christ-centered community, we are called to concern ourselves with the preaching and teaching of the faith, yet also we must not forget that we are called to enact our faith as well. We enact our faith when we come together to worship and commune at this table with Christ. We enact our faith through acts of love toward each other. We enact our faith through acts of service to our community and the world. When we do that, we are like Mary when she responds to Jesus raising her brother. We see all that God has done, is doing, and promises to do for us, and we know that our words alone can't make a fully adequate reply. So we offer to Jesus our acts of worship, service, and love. In doing so, we give our praise and our love to the friend who gives us life, we give our praise and our love to the Lord who is always reaches out and welcomes us, and we give our praise and our love to the king who claims his glory upon a cross.

Thanks be to God. Amen.