

A FRAGRANCE FILLS THE HOUSE

Texts on Sunday, March 25, 2007

Isaiah 43: 15-21

John 12: 1-8

When you set out to understand the Bible as it is, you have to come to grips with what I call “the twice told tale.” The question is, why does a particular story appear, and then appear again somewhat changed, and even yet again? There are several different reasons for the Bible’s many, many tales twice-told; we can’t discuss them this morning. You should know, though, that we have just heard one. In fact, the story of Jesus’ anointing by a woman is one of but two or three found in all four Gospels.

Each told it a little differently. John followed the lead of Matthew and Mark, who both set this story in Bethany, just before the Passover—but they had Jesus at a dinner in the house of Simon the leper, and neither offered a name for the woman with the alabaster jar of costly ointment. Luke placed Jesus in the house of Simon the *Pharisee*, and early in his ministry rather than during that last Passion Week. To Luke, the unknown woman was of the city and the streets, perhaps a prostitute. Still she had the ointment in the alabaster jar, still she wiped his feet with her hair, and her tears flowed mingled down. All four say that someone or even several got very grumpy about the uneconomical waste in the fragrant offering; only John lays harsh charges against a deceitful Judas, no doubt inflaming Christians’ anger against the Jews in his day. There is the beginning of a tragedy, but it does not touch the heart of the story. What matters is that all of them—and all of us ever since—are drawn irresistibly to this humble act of a woman, drawn like a thirsty traveler to a fountain. Why?

Because we are thirsty for a right relationship with reality. The woman with the alabaster jar has responded completely, wholly to the situation before her, to reality. She is wide awake. In Jesus, she has seen humanity whole: love, intelligence, action, obedience . . . We might go on naming his attributes, but it would not help, for she does not see a halo, but a man, perfectly, who has seen her perfectly. In this seeing, she has passed through a door. She is herself being perfected. With sudden clarity, she is unburdened of all her sin, all her fears, and she is able to make her offering. It is so full, even in its form; it is not generic offering, but a *woman’s* offering to a man. By means of her touch, she approaches the mysterious mountain pass that separates man from woman, woman from man, and she honors, and yet does not pass over, the mortal difference in our flesh.

What Mary in our story has seen is the real relationship of higher and lower, of superior and inferior, of master and servant, of living and dying, how the creature may bow wholly to heaven. She is in Christ—“there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17) She is free. We are drawn to this fountain of healing because we see in it a woman transfigured by her own act of love.

Now, seeing ourselves so alert and alive, we need to take a step closer to this fountain. We need to drink the water. We too need to make an offering, costly, personal, touching, transforming—so that the fragrance fills the house. But how? The time for a special, costly offering to Jesus is far past. Just as he said, “You will not always have me,” we simply do not have him in the old sense. We should take care not to spill words too easily about how we serve Jesus. Rather, how do we come into the real relationship of higher and lower, of master and servant, of living and dying?

Somewhere, the author Reynolds Price retells a story from his own mentor, recalling how that man’s mother had said to him out of the folds of her deathbed, “I want you to remember: I only regret my

economies.” The instant I heard those five words, I knew that they would angel me to my grave. “I only regret my economies.” We make economies at those points in our personality where we are afraid, where we think there is not going to be enough. By holding back, we try to control the outcome of the future. We hold back confession and apology, we hold back conviction, we hold back risky action, we hold back love and affection, we hold back money. Jesus had a word for it. He said that we try to save our lives, and lose them.

But your life has also been graced, I am sure, by the touch of, abounding love. I have a friend who is driving west these very days, there to be with her brother, who is slowly dying. Will she be gone two weeks? Two months? She does not know. But she knows, and you see, that this is the offering of her life. This is the jar to break open now. If she did not, she would only regret the economy.

Some of you have heard me tell of the church I served where the scourges of AIDS broke upon several of our members and then, by grace, managed to break open the fellowship as ointments of costliest love. Members who had only feared gay people now found their hearts broken with love for gentle men upon whom death’s shadow was long drawn. Fragrance filled the house.

Perhaps your mind in this moment is again filled with the fragrance of your parting finally from your parent or your life’s long companion or another cherished soul. Perhaps you broke open some long closed chamber of your heart and poured out its rich gift. Then you know in your sinews and sense why this story of a woman with the alabaster jar is told in her memory for ever. What joy! Give thanks.

But are you ready now to give attention to some economy you are still making—some withholding, some fear you guard like a school child cupping arms around a test paper, lest anyone should see? If your life is snagged on one of your economies, something cheap you gave, from which no flower can grow; if your boat is always in shallow waters, moving nowhere; if you are not really connecting with love so deep, so broad, so high as you had hoped; if you feel worn, ignored, ill-used, misunderstood, stuck in your circumstances and patterns, there is a drink for you in this fountain. This story of the woman with the jar of pure nard is for you.

Bear down. I am told that midwives and doctors in the delivery room say this to you women as you pass through the painful labor that brings us all to life. Bear down. In the grace of God, you can bear down in any circumstance you face. Bear down as with a pen on paper, to produce many copies for the authorities. Focus. Press. Bring forth.

“When circumstances persist even though I bend every effort to eliminate them, then clearly these are the will of God for me,” writes Sr. Joan Chittister. (p. 58) These circumstances that persist—the one or two sorrows or faults that keep dogging us all our lifelong day, unsolved—these are where we make our regrettable economies, trying once and again to have it our way on affordable terms. Now bear down. Give your attention wholly to your life as it is, not as you pretend it is. Your fears, your bad feelings—they are an ill wind, a bad smell. They stink and you know it. Yes, they will be blown away, as all things are blown away that are not real and eternal. And though we haven’t the strength of mind to give attention to every circumstance that hems us in and pricks our feelings, we, like Mary at the feast, can bring our attention to one situation, one circumstance, and pass through its door by means of a costly offering; an offering that will for us make real the relationship of higher and lower, our self the servant and thyself the Master. Since we cannot do this for Jesus himself, we do this for one we held least.

Now go and . . .

Gamble everything for love,
If you're a true human being.
If not, leave this gathering!
Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty.
You set out to find God, but then you keep
stopping for long periods at meanspirited road houses.
Don't wait any longer.
Dive in the ocean,
leave and let the sea be you.
Silent, absent,
walking an empty road,
all praise . . .

— *Rumi*

Try in your way to be free before God. Let your fragrance fill the house.

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