

Message for August 6, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“Showing Great Love” Rev. Trish Eckert

All four of the Gospels tell a story of a woman anointing Jesus. The other three Gospels place these anointing stories in the week leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. In Luke’s Gospel, it occurs in the middle of Jesus’ ministry, long before his death. Each version centers on God’s love, but rather than that love being shown in the Passion of Christ, it’s shown in forgiveness and hospitality.

As the story opens, Luke shows us Jesus dining, Greco-Roman style, in the home of a prominent religious leader named Simon. In Jesus’ day, there were no paved roads, no socks, and no running water. So, it was expected that a host would provide guests with a servant to wash their feet on their arrival, as well as providing some scented ointment for their hair. Since Simon had invited Jesus to dine, he should have provided a servant to wash Jesus’ feet before he came to the table so that he would be entirely clean. It seems that Simon didn’t.

The setting would have included cushions or couches placed alongside low tables, with the guests reclining on them. This is why it was possible for the woman to come up *behind* Jesus and begin to anoint his feet and wipe them with her hair. We don’t need to imagine her crawling under a table. Nor do we need to imagine her breaking in, as a personal invitation wasn’t necessary. The less fortunate were allowed to visit such public banquets and take any of the food that was left. *However*, only men would eat together, while women would enter the room only to serve the food if a servant wasn’t present. They wouldn’t talk with the men and would never touch a man in public. So, while this woman hasn’t broken into Simon’s house, she is violating social standards of respectable behavior for a woman by simply being in the room.

In the first moment that she is described, we learn that she is a sinner. In the Jewish context, the description ‘sinner’ would indicate someone who was not faithful to God’s law – someone who transgressed the Torah. We don’t know anything specific about her particular sin. It’s routine for commentators to assume that she’s a prostitute, as if the only sin a Jewish woman of the first century could commit would be a sexual sin. And in our own time and place, this same tendency is rooted in our culture – we have plenty of hang-ups that cause us to elevate women or degrade women, policing their bodies, consuming their images --- projecting our issues on the other. Luke doesn’t tell us what her sin is, just that her sin was well-known.

Now, many of us are pretty squeamish about this laden term, “sinner.” So I found it fortuitous that Richard Rohr, in this week’s meditations from the Center for Action and Contemplation touched on sin in his meditations regarding nonviolence and pain. Rohr notes that sin is rooted in pain, and that we need to acknowledge and own our pain, rather than projecting it on others. He explains that sin is not so much personal moral failure (although it is that too) as it is humans trying to validate themselves in a world where there is no completely solid place to stand. All of our responses are flawed and

partial – everything human disappoints on some level. We tend to grasp for Love in the wrong places and in ways that will never work. We see this as we witness the faults and failings of most of our heroes, of ourselves, every religion and denomination, and every form of government.

The power of the 14 verses that make up this text is that as we pay attention to the details of this story, we can come to know ourselves differently – can we relate to the unnamed woman? To her desperation? Are we awed by her vulnerability and courage? When we hear the Pharisee’s private thoughts, judging this woman, can any of us say without hesitation that we have never judged or looked down on another person? He hosts this fancy meal with a healer/ a miracle worker as the guest of honor and someone he didn’t invite shows up – someone that everyone agrees is doing everything wrong and he was focused on doing everything right – inviting the right people, providing the right answers to questions, fulfilling his role and his place within his culture and acceptable society. Of course, Jesus shows up to turn all of this on its head – to remind Simon and now to remind us that we are all children of God, and that we need to align ourselves with God’s laws rather than human (flawed) frameworks because no matter what, we are loved, and we are forgiven.

So let’s dive and imagine the scene - we’re pulled in immediately: a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.

Alabaster was a soft stone, imported from Egypt into Palestine, especially popular for storing perfume and ointments. It was light and creamy in color, usually faintly lined with veins. We’re talking a small flask here, something she could easily have slipped inside her tunic – pint-size, palm-size, purse-size.

Alabaster jars were common – it was the substance hidden inside that was valuable. Her jar undoubtedly contained all the perfume she owned. Pure nard, all essence, no alcohol, very expensive. The tiniest dab on the wrist was all you needed.

But she wasn’t wearing the perfume, drawing attention to herself with its scent. She was carrying it in a small alabaster vial, her attention fixed on finding one particular dinner guest who might appreciate the fragrant aroma of her sacrifice.

She knew what the townsfolk thought of her. Their whispered words and rude stares make that painfully clear. But this Jesus was different. His words were kind, not cruel. His gaze reflected compassion, not judgment.

The thought of such a man looking at her surely had her trembling with expectation. Perhaps she only meant to catch a glimpse of him from afar, but seeing his gentle countenance, she was drawn toward him, closer and closer, until she stood right behind him. That’s when the tears came unbidden. She could not move, could not speak for all her anguished weeping.

From a well deep inside her, tears poured out in an endless flow, streaming over her cheeks, slipping down her neck. Every mistake, every hurt, every regret welled up in her heart and flowed down her face. Deep shame mixed with a strange sense of lightness. The tears, held back for so long, were suddenly released and spilled out like perfume, leaving her vulnerable, exposed, repentant, not caring who saw her or what they thought of her.

She didn't try to stop herself from weeping. Couldn't, in fact. Not in the presence of the Divine. She was cracked wide open, and the tears couldn't be contained. Were they tears of sorrow or tears of joy? **Yes.**

Standing so close to him, she knew that Jesus alone understood her, forgave her, loved her. He hadn't sent her away. He hadn't brushed off her tears in disgust. He accepted her as she was. His grace only increased her devotion. With her head bowed in reverence, her body soon followed as she dropped to her knees only inches from his feet.

Her hair would have been bound up, according to social custom. To let down her hair in public would have been incredibly bold. But she was already an outcast. Untouchable. Unchosen. She belonged to no one. Except perhaps this man Jesus.

She loosened her hair, and as it fell around her shoulders, she bent over farther still, until his tear-drenched feet were all that her eyes could encompass. Using the dark strands like a silken hand towel, patting his feet until they were dry once more.

She didn't dare speak, but her thoughts were surely spinning. Jesus didn't rebuke her for touching him. He'd received her adoration, not once drawing back. Overcome with emotion, with gratitude, with devotion, she let her mouth follow the same path her fingers had taken and lightly touched his feet with her lips. In the most public of places, she performed one of the most intimate, yet innocent of acts. She pressed her mouth to his feet. Her unabashed affection and total humility were breathtaking. Yet she had one more expression of love, quite literally up her sleeve.

Her initial intent may have been merely to touch a drop of the perfumed ointment to his head, as was common. But that was before she'd seen him, touched him, kissed him. It was too late for such restraint. Extravagantly, yet with purpose, she poured the precious contents of her alabaster jar over his feet. She poured out every priceless drop. The heady scent of it must have permeated the room, sending necks craning to see what woman had dared invade their male-only gathering.

No doubt their whispers and snide remarks swirled around her, even as her ministrations required every ounce of concentration, rendering her immune to their cruel commentary.

In the other three Gospels we hear a tale of a woman who spilled out her costly perfume from an alabaster jar or box, twice on his head, once on his feet. In those stories, however, her actions led to the disciples whining about how the perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. But in this scene, the woman and her worship are the focus of the story, not the perfume.

Because these stories are so familiar – are so layered in our consciousness, it is impossible to encompass all of the details or touch on every aspect of the text. An important facet of this story calls us to pay close attention to the violence that is being perpetrated here. The unnamed woman is treated as a pariah – it is considered acceptable to push her out to the margins, to ignore her, exclude her, deride her. The intensity of this violence became crystal clear for me as I reflected further on Richard Rohr’s daily posts this week.

Simon was so focused on what was wrong with this woman that he didn’t recognize his own sin in judging her and of being part of the system designed to control her. Rohr reminds us that we have to begin within and allow ourselves to be transformed.

He writes, “Most people I know are *overly* identified with their own thoughts and feelings. They don’t *really* have feelings; their feelings have them. That may be what earlier Christians meant by being “possessed” by a demon. That’s why so many of Jesus’ miracles are the exorcism of devils. Most of us don’t take that literally anymore, but the devil is still a powerful metaphor, and it demands that we take it quite seriously.” He goes on to say, “Everyone has a few devils. I know I’m ‘possessed’ at least once or twice a day, even if just for a few minutes!”

If we allow the possibility for transformation, as Richard Rohr describes it, we come to realize that our authentic identity is love. This approach to life includes hope for the basic well-being of the other. This was Jesus’ deepest wish for each person he encountered. We witness the transformation of the unnamed woman, and we imagine the transformation of Simon, as Jesus asks, “Do you see this woman?” and Jesus tells him, “she has shown great love.”

In the gospel we see Jesus moving among so many kept outside the circle of well-being/ by institutional violence which claimed that healing and well-being belonged to some and not to others. Jesus always found those who had been pushed outside the circle of care and invited them back into the community through the door of healing. He taught the community that its well-being was tied to the well-being of each member.

Once again we see Jesus’ persistent refusal to distance himself from us. From the hungry, from the sick, from those who have lost their way, from the outcast, from those burdened by the labels and names and roles laid upon them: Jesus refuses to turn away. And not only does he resist turning away; he welcomes those who risk making their way to him. He recognizes and elevates those who push beyond the barriers and boundaries and rebuffs: the woman, so long bleeding, who reaches out for the hem of his robe; the

children who gather around him; the women who, in every gospel, come to anoint and bless him, who see him as no one else does.

In this passage from Luke, in the unnamed woman's lavish gesture, we see how love pours itself out: not in self-abnegation, but in an offering that springs from the depths of who we are. Love makes its way past the labels, breaks through the burdens of prejudice and stereotype and bias. This woman who has been set free by Jesus, and who now comes to anoint him: she knows this. She knows how love looses us, how it bridges the distance between us, how it calls us to recognize and respond to the holy in our midst. With such clarity and grace, she illuminates who Jesus is. With his response, Jesus illuminates who we are: not defined by the sins of the past but by the love and grace of the present.