

It's strange the things that stick in our memories. The memories that last the longest and stay the strongest are sensory memories, memories that are linked to sights or sounds, textures or even tastes and smells that we've actually experienced for ourselves. Part of my acting training was to learn to take advantage of such sensory memories to help recall certain emotional states associated with them. For example, there is a certain blend of smells of fresh coffee, frying bacon and other breakfast-y aromas that always recalls for me a feeling of deep peace and well-being. It's specifically connected with a memory from my childhood, of being snuggled into a bed at my grandmother's house in Herculaneum, Missouri, sleeping late and waking to hear my parents, aunts and uncles gathered around the breakfast table in the kitchen next door while my grandma patiently cooked breakfast for all of us. Most of the people around that table are gone now but the memory remains as fresh for me as it was 40 years ago. All it takes is that certain blend of smells or something very close to it and I am instantly transported back to that time.

Other memories are more elusive, built up of many small impressions over the years – stories we've read or heard, movies we've seen, pictures we've looked at. These coalesce around other, more personal, sensory memories and give us the ability to imagine things we've never seen, places we've never been. I've never, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, been in a desert the like of the ones in the Middle East. But I know that from my very earliest days, I would have seen pictures of the Three Wise Men on their camels and heard stories of Abraham and Sarah traveling from watering hole to watering hole with their nomadic flocks. I know that I saw that spectacular film by David Lean, "Lawrence of Arabia," during my childhood and its images stayed with me for years. And one of my favorite books as a boy was one centered on the adventures and derring-do of the French Foreign Legion in the Sahara, Beau Geste by P.C. Wren. Those second-hand memories combined with my own sensory memories of a sky full of stars and the smell of spices allows me immediate access to an imaginary oasis. So when I read a commentary by Jerry Goebel this week that called this dinner in Bethany, "the last oasis of Jesus' journey," I knew immediately what he meant. Along the hard road to Jerusalem, which Jesus took willingly, knowing he was going to die, facing opposition from friend and foe alike, drawing near the end of that excruciating, exhausting journey, this story gives us a glimpse of Jesus at rest, surrounded by those who cared most for him, enjoying one last moment of earthly joy before his greatest trial.

If we use our own sensory and emotional memories to help us enter this scene, we cannot help but be swept up by the enormous waves of feeling inherent in the story. The scene is Bethany, a village just outside Jerusalem. The difficulty of the journey and the nearness of the city where Jesus' predicted he would die would surely have left most of the travelers in a state of nervous and physical exhaustion. But here they are among friends. Here are Martha and Mary, dear friends who had hosted them so many times: Martha, always the perfect hostess, always with plenty of food and drink to restore their physical needs; Mary, always eager to sit at Jesus' feet and to learn from him, always (I imagine) ready to engage the ones who traveled with him in conversation about what the Master had done and said while he was away. In this house, they were not rabble being chased from town to town by the scribes and Pharisees, but honored guests. And here, miracle of miracles, was Jesus' dear friend, Lazarus, the one he had raised from the dead just days or weeks before. Can you imagine the joy that must have attended the reunion of those friends, Jesus and the friend he wept over, Lazarus and the friend who had called him out of death with the voice of power? Days, weeks, months, even years after the

miracle, Mary, Martha and Lazarus would have gladly pulled out all the stops when Jesus came to town. I imagine Martha's dinner that night might have rivaled the special dinner portrayed in the Danish film, "Babette's Feast," which Connie and I finally saw last week after having it recommended to us for years. The party in Bethany would have been a party to remember.

But no matter how generous the party was, no matter how sumptuous the dinner, the rest of the evening pales into insignificance in the face of one extravagant act. At the end of the meal, as all the guests reclined and talked and laughed, Mary left and then came back into the room. In her hands was a jar, perhaps of alabaster, containing a pound of the purest nard, the perfume made from the oil of the spikenard plant from Northern India. She knelt at Jesus' feet, where she so often sat to hear him teach and poured the entire contents of the jar over his feet. Then she uncovered and unbound her long hair and used it to gently massage the oil into his skin, letting her hair soak up the excess along with any residual dirt and sweat that he had not managed to wash off when he came in, tears streaming down her face the entire time.

I want to make sure that we really take note of just how extreme Mary's act of devotion was. First, there is act of simply washing Jesus' feet. To provide water for a guest to wash his or her own feet was a part of expected hospitality in that hot, dry and dusty land, where even the best-shod were limited to open sandals. But to wash someone else's feet was the duty of a slave, not a free woman. By this act, Mary was going beyond sitting at Jesus' feet as a devoted student. Now she was declaring herself no more than a slave to him, just one step up from the self-abasement of his cousin, John the Baptizer, who said, "I am not worthy to unfasten his sandals." Then there was the substance used. Perfumed oil like this was generally reserved for embalming the dead or anointing a king. It was incredibly expensive. Judas estimated its value at 300 denarii. Consider that a denarius was the daily wage of a common laborer. 300 denarii, then, would have been about a year's wages. If we translate that into today's money, using just the current minimum wage in Washington State, we're talking about nearly \$16,000 worth of perfume, \$1,000 an ounce. I checked online, by the way, and it is possible to buy perfume that costs that much, an ounce of V'E Versace Women by Gianni Versace, for example, but it does come in a Bacarat crystal bottle.

The outlandishness of Mary's act goes beyond the slavishness of her devotion and her financial prodigality, though. She also shatters cultural taboos with her worship of her beloved Rabbi. She lets down her hair, which no one but her husband should see, and she touches a man who is not her husband. In this day and age, when women throwing their undergarments at pop singers is almost an expected tribute, I'm not sure I can adequately devise a parallel that would be as shocking to us the sight of Mary cleaning Jesus' feet with her hair would have been to those in attendance. In first century Palestine, much as in the most fundamentalist Muslim areas today, only a prostitute would have been seen with her hair uncovered. There is a story in the Talmud of a woman who raised seven saintly sons, all of whom became High Priests. Their holy character was attributed in part to her great modesty. "Never," she said, "have the rafters of my house seen the plaits of my hair."

But even knowing the absolute extravagance of Mary's gesture, perhaps we can understand it. All of us here this morning except the very youngest among us have known the pain of the death of a loved one. What might we do for one who had reversed such a death and restored health?

What might we do, what should we do, for the one who has restored us to true life in the midst of our brokenness, in the face of the deadness of our souls? Mary's extravagant act of love is an act of worship. John the Evangelist tells us that Martha has proclaimed her belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, prior to the raising of Lazarus but Mary, as far as we know, has not proclaimed this belief in words. But she knows that Jesus is the teacher with the word of truth and she knows he holds the power of life over death. Not with her words but with her unrestrained, unashamed actions, she also proclaims him as Savior and Master. She didn't care what her sister said or thought when she sat at his feet to hear him teach while Martha was busy in the kitchen and she doesn't care what anyone will say or think now as she shows her devotion to her Lord in the tenderest, most personal way she can imagine. I would imagine that no one who was there that night ever forgot Mary's actions. John tells us that the whole house was filled with the smell of the perfume. Perhaps, in years to come, the smell of that kind of perfume reminded those who had been present of that amazing moment and Mary's love for Jesus.

There was, of course, at least one present that night who voiced the feeling of scandal that many might have felt. Judas protested the waste of a valuable asset that might have funded the stated mission of Jesus' ministry, to care for the poor. Judas looked at Mary's act of devotion and immediately counted the cost. Mary, of course, did not. All she was concerned with was responding fully to the need she saw before her, the need of one she loved for rest and comfort and tender care. Judas reduced the event to an equation – one pampered Messiah equaled x number of hungry people. Today, we remember Mary's great love for Jesus and we remember Judas as a thief and betrayer. But even if it had been another of the disciples who protested, I think we would know, with or without Jesus' retort, that the attitude of cold calculation does not fit into the picture of the love of the Father and of the Son for us. The wastefulness, the prodigality of Mary's act is a good match for the wastefulness of the father of the so-called prodigal son, who greets his lost son with unrestrained love and joy, gives over to him his very finest possessions and throws the biggest party the village has seen in years to welcome him home. "The Kingdom of Heaven," Jesus taught, "is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." Mary is willing to give all to celebrate the presence of Jesus and Jesus is willing to give all to celebrate our presence in the Kingdom. Those in true relationship with God do not stop to count the cost of love.

John tells us that Judas was a thief, which may have been harsh. It may have simply been the pain of betrayal expressing itself years later. "If he did this great evil thing, then surely he must have done lesser evil things," may have been John's thought. But it is certainly not unreasonable to question Judas' motives for questioning Mary. Judas' careful calculations of value give the appearance of someone who is keeping score. "If I feed this many hungry people, then I will have achieved salvation. If I give this much to the church, people will respect and listen to what I have to say. If I write this check to charity, I can take it off my taxes." It's a trap we all understand. But the lavishness of Mary's giving matches the lavishness of God's grace, which does not calculate our worth but merely declares us worthy. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us," Paul wrote to the Romans.

Still, it may be a bit jarring to us to hear Jesus' response to Judas. This verse has been used over the years as an excuse to ignore the poor. Can this be what Jesus' meant? "You're not going to

solve the problem of the poor, so spend your money on what you feel like”? That hardly makes sense in light of Jesus’ whole ministry or in light of God’s commitment to the poor witnessed in the Torah, in the Writings and in the Prophets. Or was Jesus putting his own needs before the poor? “Pay attention to me now because it’s your last chance!” Again, that doesn’t make much sense coming from one who gave up everything, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” Mary’s focus may have been on Jesus but Jesus’ focus was on Mary, on her need to express her gratitude, on her need to worship.

We do need to worship, we human beings. We need to be in relationship with our Creator, to offer our praise and thanks to God. We feel the need to acknowledge that there is One in the universe greater than us, who nonetheless loves us unreservedly. When I was a boy, growing up in the South, it was not unusual to see grown men, leaders of the community, on their knees in church on Sunday morning, with tears pouring from their eyes, expressing their great gratitude and love for Jesus. Some of that, certainly, was carefully choreographed or simple emotional reflex, but much of it was heartfelt and genuine. We don’t see much of that in today’s American Baptist churches, at least the Euro-centric ones. I wonder what would happen if we allowed ourselves to be as unrestrained in our worship occasionally as Mary? Would we be embarrassed for anyone who was so moved? Or would we recapture some of the passion that first led us to embrace Jesus and his way? Would our emotional outpourings distract us from the good works we have in hand to bless the poor of our community or would we find that our worship, our devotion, actually increased our generosity?

We do have much to be worshipful about. The Almighty God does love us unreservedly; the Word has become flesh and suffered to show us the way to the truth. It is this wonderful state of affairs that gives us the foundation for our own benevolence. In his commentary on this passage, Gil Baillie suggested that Jesus’ words to Judas might be amplified as follows: “Yes, indeed, we should minister to the poor, and you will have from now until the end of time to do that. You must do that. Plenty of time for it. Have at it. Except you won’t even be inspired to do that, unless you get what it is that I’m here to reveal to you.” Faith without works may be dead but works without faith, without gratitude, without worship, will avail us nothing. Yes, it is critical that we work to relieve the poor, for they are still, always among us, and their cries are heard by God. But to fuel our desire to help, we must worship. John Stendahl wrote, “When we come to church, or when we spend time in that transfigured space which is Sabbath, it is not just for the sake of the mission and agenda that lies ahead of us. It is also to be there, to have some time like this in Bethany, to cherish the gift of Christ in the now, and to anoint him already while he is our guest.”

How do we cherish the gift of Christ in our lives, how do we anoint his presence in our lives? For her friends and family, the smell of that perfume would always be associated with Mary and her love for Jesus. What smell is associated with our lives? At many, many places in the Old Testament, we read of sacrifices on the altar, the smell of which is “a sweet savour unto the Lord.” But the old system of animal sacrifices is over. True sacrifices to God, even in the Old Testament period, are quite different. The Psalmist wrote, “The sacrifices of God are a broken

spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved...a fragrance from life to life.” True worship from true hearts is the smell that is pleasing to God, that surrounds us like the aroma from a jar of perfume poured over our hot dusty feet. The joy and gratitude that was in Mary that night can be in us as God leads us in triumphal procession. As we walk in Christ, doing our best in life to do as he did, powered by his Spirit, so we spread that intoxicating odor of the Good News, so we invite others to find, as we have, the true and lasting oasis in life that comes from having Jesus as the very core of our lives. As we go through life, knowing every day the wonderful love of God in Christ for us, I wonder, how can we keep from weeping and falling at His feet? He has given us a new song. How can we keep from singing?