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John 12:1-8

## The Fragrance of Humility

When I was growing up, my grandfather used to smoke cigars and pipes. Next to his chair in the den – you know, *his* chair – he kept a big can of redskin peanuts. And in his end table next to the chair he had a drawer that held his bag of circus peanuts – those plastic looking, fake orange candies with the texture of Styrofoam held shut by a clothespin. That’s how I remember my grandfather – by imaging those smells sort of collected together into “Granddad smell”. Cherry tobacco, roasted, salted nuts and the artificial orange of circus peanuts...those smells add up to equal my grandfather.

There are other ways that smells evoke memories – sausage or baking cookies transports me back to that same kitchen, the one next to the den where the “granddad smell” lingered. The smell of burning leaves takes me back to Marlow, where my mom grew up, and the visits to that set of grandparents in the spring or fall when people would burn their leaves in big metal containers and the acrid smell would drift down the streets. Even now when I smell baby powder or the antiseptic odor of those baby wipes, just for a moment I am holding one of my boys and doing things that I am happy not to be doing anymore. The sense of smell is a powerful thing and our olfactory memories seem to linger for longer periods of time and evoke very visceral reactions when they are triggered.

Often rituals use this sense of smell to evoke certain memories or feelings. It’s why incense is used in many religious traditions, why candles and fragrant flowers get incorporated into the flow of ritual practice. Soon we will have

Easter lilies all over the place, a very fragrant flower whose powerful scent literally ushers in spring for many people.

What we are witness to in this passage from John is a ritual act. We may not recognize it as such, but this “anointing” was a very common act in the ancient world, only here it is re-imagined into something very particular. This story of a woman “anointing” Jesus appears in all of the gospels, though at different times and with different details. In Mark, the woman is unnamed and she pours the ointment on his head very much like a ritual for the coronation of kings or the ordination of priests. In Matthew she does the same. In Luke she anoints with oil and tears. But in John, she uses the ointment on his feet, which we will see evokes a completely different ritual.

In the ancient world people walked everywhere, and not on nicely paved streets or sidewalks like we do. They walked on dirt and in cities on streets that doubled as sewers and garbage dumps. So when you would visit someone’s home, it was a generous thing for the host to wash your feet. But really any host that was high enough status to do this would have a slave do it. That’s how it was done.

This passage comes in the midst of Jesus instructing his disciples in what was expected of them. John differs from Matthew or Mark in that he places this story where the other gospels have the Passover meal – the Last Supper. In fact, John has no Last Supper story but replaces it with Jesus praying before his betrayal that they his disciples might continue to believe and do his work.

So, not only does John change the structure, he also names this woman – makes her a critical character in fact – and changes the ritual. In the other versions the woman is unnamed and is either implied or downright stated to be a woman of “ill repute”...a sinner. Jesus’ acceptance of the ritual from her is more of a statement about his relationship to the so-called sinners, the marginalized, of his time. But here John is saying something else – this ritual is geared towards the disciples.

Mary – one of many Marys in the Bible – takes the central role in John’s ritual. This is Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus has just raised from the dead. So there they sit, these three, in their home with Jesus and a few of the disciples having traveled to see them. They sit on the floor as the pungent aroma of garlic, olives, lentils and wine fills the air, mixing with the typical smells emanating from people who have traveled and haven’t bathed in quite a while. Add to this...Lazarus. The account right before this of his raising from the dead

recounts Martha letting Jesus know that he had been dead for four days already and was kind of stinky. So how is he now?

In the midst of this cacophony of odor comes Mary with an alabaster jar of Nard – the spice used to anoint dead bodies to prepare them for burial. We know that it is strong stuff based only on the job that it is asked to do. She opens a large amount of it – a very expensive gift – and washes Jesus’ feet with it...drying them with her hair.

There is, like the other accounts, a sexual tension here with the whole hair thing. In this culture for a woman to let her hair down like she would have to in order to use it as a towel is a striking and suggestive thing – even scandalous. It is why the other gospels have this edge of a woman of “ill repute” performing this ritual. As Judith Kaye Jones states in her book Women in the Gospel of John, Mary’s behavior was “certainly unorthodox for women of her time”, but “the entire Gospel of John presents women doing things that were considered unorthodox”. Women converse with men, they openly learn from Jesus and play the role of disciple, they even, in the case of the Syrophoneician woman at the well, *teach* Jesus. John doesn’t mean for this to be scandalous, he uses women throughout his gospel to be the purveyors of truth...the ones who “get it” even when the disciples don’t.

Mary performs an act of service, a gesture of humility...one that usually would be expected of a slave. In many ways, this ritual of washing Jesus’ feet is meant to portray again that even while the disciples don’t get it...the ones who are “officially following Jesus”, the women do...at least this one does. For John, the gospel is about belief, even belief in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary and belief that goes against everything you have accepted as right and true. This belief requires complete humility in order to accept it.

This belief that Jesus is teaching – this faith – is one that will challenge and scandalize us. The Greek word we translate belief is *pistis*, which really means faith but as a verb. We can’t do this in English...we can’t have people faithing, so we use belief. But they are not synonymous terms. Belief has to do with cognitive processes; with statements or logical declarations...I *believe* that the earth rotates around the sun or that I need to change my oil every 3,000 miles. For the Judeans of ancient Palestine, the belief statement was in the messiah, and the way that the messiah would change their world by leading them to victory in war. But faith, these early followers of Jesus would soon discover, faith is a different thing.

In John's gospel, the most metaphysical of the gospels, Jesus knows all about his journey and he understands what is coming at the end of this story. The disciples don't really see this and even as often as he reminds them, as frequently as he spells it out, they still have this inability to face the truth. This is the messiah, they think, there will be no suffering for him. This is the son of God walking among us; there is not inevitability of pain for him. He walks on water and multiplies loaves of bread and fish...he feeds the multitude and even rolls away the stone of death to bring back Lazarus into the world of the living. Maybe...just maybe we will get the same deal because, after all, we love him and follow him as our rabbi. Maybe we'll be able to have our cake and eat it too.

Judas is quick to pipe up in this story. He is quick to point out the apparent hypocrisy of Jesus and John is quick to explain that Judas has ulterior motives...it's the best way to contend with controversial accusations, discredit the accuser. Judas, John would have us know, doesn't care at all about the poor...he's worried that there will be less for him to embezzle later. Judas is the needed traitor.

This tradition of blaming the Jews for Jesus' execution goes back centuries. We can look at Passion plays, paintings, some Holy Week liturgies and even more modern things like Mel Gibson's bloody and anti-Semitic film The Passion of the Christ. It is easy to read that into the words on the pages in front of us, perhaps even easier in the Gospel of John where he constantly refers to "the Jews" as the enemy and the instigators of Jesus' demise. But that is dangerous ground.

John refers, in Greek, to the "Judeans" not the "Jews" and makes a very careful distinction between the common people and the authorities - both Roman and Jewish. John is sure to let us know that the people he really marks with responsibility are those Judeans in power and the ones who cooperate with the Roman occupation in order to maintain that power. It is empire and those who cooperate with that empire, in this case Rome, that kill Jesus, not the Jews.

Judas then becomes the one that it is easy to pin it all on. He is the weak link. It provides us with a convenient way to absolve ourselves. We get to say that we were following right along until the traitor gave it all away. But I'm not sure that John lets us off that easily. After all, 300 denarii sure gives off a pleasing aroma of its own...

A denarii was about a day's wage...so we're talking a year's salary here. Maybe Judas has a point...after all, money seems to change a lot of minds about

things. Yes, caring for the sick and poor is a good idea, but how much will it cost? We never seem to ask that same question about our military budget, but that keeps us safe, so...when do we follow and when do we bend a little? How often do we see the “writing on the wall” and just stop?

Mary could see what others couldn't. She knew, or perhaps she just accepted, that Jesus wasn't going to survive this trip to Jerusalem. There were too many things stacked against him, too many ways that he had changed the game. Jesus was preaching the already present kingdom of God and thereby standing against the already present kingdom of Rome...and those kinds of pronouncements don't sit well with the authorities who have the power to kill the body.

When she anointed his feet she was acknowledging something. We divide ourselves into two basic categories – body and soul. The ancients in this part of the world divided the body into zones, each with its own governance. For example, the eyes and heart work together to symbolize our knowledge and judgment...so we “see to believe” or we know things “by heart”. The feet and hands are symbolic of one's action in the world, one's behavior. So Mary, to an ancient audience, was anointing Jesus' actions, she was acknowledging the significant event he was about to engage in and she was blessing his behavior. She was establishing the high water mark for discipleship from there on out – our mission was to be based on being feet and hands – action - based on acting “like Jesus” not just believing “in Jesus”.

This passage ends with Jesus saying these famous or infamous words – “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” This has been used time and again to discount the need for Christians to care for the needy and neglected. Perhaps it is Glenn Beck's favorite passage, I don't know. But to discount the entire body of Jesus' life, which always met need with care and pain with healing, by quoting a single line is ludicrous. Besides we have to look at this line carefully.

It is very important to note that Jesus' response is a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11, the entirety of which reads, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” Rather than minimize one's obligation to care for the poor, Jesus here quotes a verse which explicitly commands it. I think that what Jesus is saying is this – the life I am leading, this humble and caring life, will always be needed. If you, as my disciples, are simply

drafting off me, just lining up behind my shadow and coasting into the finish line you have missed the point. The work is here to be done. Jesus is no longer here in the same way to lead us along the path. We have been given the Holy Spirit and one another to guide us. We have been promised that whenever two or more are gathered, that Christ will be with us. But we don't have a physical body here. And yet Christ needs hands and feet, and we have hands and feet.

So here's what I imagine...Mary is at this dinner looking at Jesus across the table. She can see the slight bit of sadness in his face and his eyes just a little bit distant. The heat of the day is fading into the night, but she smells the sharp odor that has faded but still lingers on her brother...that mark of death that will not quite let go. It makes her remember that hot day that Jesus came to visit, but too late. Lazarus was dead. She remembers their grief that was so complete and heavy and she remembered the most unexpected thing – that Jesus wept, rolled away the stone and brought Lazarus back to them...Lazarus, whose name means “God is my help”.

And then suddenly Mary knew. She knew what was happening...what that sad tint on Jesus' face was...she knew what Jesus was in Jerusalem to do. She knew that the authorities could no longer let him live. Jesus had shown people that death was not the final answer...that death, the one power that empire has over all people, was powerless. The empire thrived on death – it would control you with economic death, and if that didn't work, social death, if that didn't work, religious death, and if that didn't work, they could deliver the most potent death in physical form. For the empire has control over your body...but Jesus had spoken out against this in word and deed and now...the final stone was moved, the final die was cast and the final straw was placed on the camel's back.

Mary could have done lots of things in that moment, lots of things with that realization. She could have laid down and wept even more profoundly than she did for Lazarus, she could have cried out “no” in anguish, she could have resisted, she could have told all of the other disciples and demanded that they hide Jesus from the authorities or used that knowledge to position herself as the primary disciple because she knew more than the others. But what Mary chose to do was to go into her room and get that expensive jar of ointment that she had bought just after Lazarus had been raised. The one that she had bought because she never wanted to be in the position of having someone she loved so deeply being dishonored in their passing.

She could have filled the room with the heavy odor of planned vengeance, or the stink of hatred and violent retribution...she could have made the room reek of shallow, empty praise or small-minded politics. She could have thought only of herself and what she might regret or grieve for...but instead she filled that crowded room with the sweet fragrance of humility.

I wonder what the disciples years later remembered when they passed through a market and smelled that perfume available for sale? I wonder what visceral emotion came to them when they caught a whiff of that deep fragrance? Did it remind them of Jesus as archetypal sacrifice for our sins, or did it remind them that Jesus still had hands and feet in the world, only now they belong to us?

I wonder what it might be like if when we remembered Jesus...if when we sought to honor Jesus, instead of another song about his glory, we just acted with humility and compassion and grace? What if instead of insisting our own way or spending so much energy deciding who is right and who is wrong we just washed each other's feet?

I don't know what memories that might evoke or what that might make our world be like, but I do that that the fragrance would be wonderful...

AMEN

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