



Lawrence Park Community Church

United • Unorthodox • Unlimited

On Her Feet

Texts: Luke 14

Preached March 7, 2010 by Alison L. Mock

A group of friends had gathered for dinner at the home of Mary and Martha. Mary and Martha were sisters, and somewhat uncommon women. Both unmarried, they should have been poor, for there was no reputable way in those days for a woman to earn her own living – but they had their own house, and seemed to live quite happily, well-respected in the community, always with enough food to go around. This was not the first time that the disciples had gathered in their home, either. There had been at least one other meal that had resulted in a fight between the two sisters – Martha had been angry because she had spent the whole time toiling in the kitchen, cooking food and washing dishes, while Mary lounged in the living room with Jesus and the others, discussing “important things.” She seemed not to understand her responsibilities – her place was in the kitchen, after all – but the really strange thing is that the others, especially Jesus, didn’t seem to mind a bit. It was almost as if Mary was one of the guys.

And here they all were again in Bethany, a stop on the road to Jerusalem, where Jesus would make his entrance the very next day. The sisters’ home had been busy lately, because their brother, Lazarus, was the man that Jesus had famously raised from the dead, and word had gotten around. Lazarus was there too, that evening. Martha had cooked a delicious meal, as usual, and when it was finished, the men lounged around the table, bellies too full to move, probably engaging in slightly drunken laughter and exaggerated storytelling. The Passover feast was just a few days away, but tonight seemed an ordinary night like any other – until a jar smashed and a strong smell filled the room. The men looked up, and couldn’t believe what they saw. Mary was on the floor, at Jesus’ feet. She had broken the neck of a bottle that contained a rare perfumed ointment. She was pouring the liquid all over Jesus’ feet, and she washed them. Her long hair, always kept bound tight, was flowing loose. As if this weren’t embarrassing enough (no *respectable* woman would ever be seen with her hair down), she was using her hair to dry Jesus’ feet.

The awkward silence was deafening. On and on she continued – Mary didn’t speak, Jesus didn’t speak, and the disciples watched, frozen in that odd mix of embarrassment and shock, until finally Judas Iscariot could stand it no more. “What...are...you...*DOING?*”, he hissed. Really, enough was enough. This was absolute scandal. Here is Mary, bold as brass – she thinks she’s good enough to hang around with the guys, she talks to Jesus like an equal, she’s already a bit of an odd duck – and now this? He had seen that perfume in her house before, sitting there on the shelf, sealed for a special occasion. He knew what it was, and he knew exactly what it was worth. He had checked it on e-bay. It must have been the most valuable thing the sisters owned. And now, because of her reckless act, all that money had been wasted. He shuddered to think what he could have done with that cash (a year’s salary!) that now lay in a puddle on the floor. The smell in the house was overpowering, suffocating with the stench of waste. And the disciples had been witness to a public display of affection in epic proportions. What was Mary doing on the floor, lying at Jesus’ feet with her hair all over the place like that? Was she in love with him or something? How dare she???

Poor Judas. We understand how he feels. Mary was bestowing a gift on Jesus, a gift of incredible generosity and love – and all Judas could see was the cost. He did a cost-benefit analysis in his head, and he arrived quickly at an answer of waste. An unbalanced equation. Does this sound familiar? We do this all the time, and never is it more evident than when tax time rolls around. I did my taxes over the weekend. I faithfully worked away on QuickTax, answering all their questions and plugging in all the numbers from my little slips of paper. When I was finished, the “refund” number was green, and I was a happy camper. But later, in sorting through another pile of papers, I found a charitable donation receipt from SickKids, a receipt that I had forgotten to enter. Score! Another deduction – this means I will get even more money back!

Oops. Never mind why I gave that donation in the first place. Never mind our personal connection to Sick Kids, that Sarah was a patient there when she was still a fetus, and the outstanding care we received inspired us to support the hospital. Never mind the thousands of other kids who use the facility every year, who really count on fundraising donations. Never mind that it feels great to support a good cause, be it Sick Kids or any other charity. Come March 1st, the only thing that matters to me about my charitable gift is *what I stand to benefit from it*. Our gifts, even those made generously at the time, are reduced to sheer numbers. What’s in it for me? Maybe if I gave a little more next year, my refund would be even higher. And so it goes. Most of us would probably not be able to give away our most valuable possession without some thought as to the impact on our material worth. We are just not very good at uncalculated generosity.

We are somewhat disturbed, too, by the image of Mary lying on the floor, wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair. There is an anointing woman in each of the gospels, this story is told to us four times in four different ways. The interesting thing is that it’s a different woman every time, and John is the only one who names Mary, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, as the woman to bestow this gift. We have met Mary before, and everywhere else she appears scripture, she is anything but subservient, she is no fainting flower. Some might even call her the Bible’s first feminist, as she talks to Jesus like an equal and hangs out with the boys, shunning her traditional “female” responsibilities. She is not a figure who we would expect to find bowing down at the feet of any man. This confronts us with a male-female dynamic that in our time, we find awfully troubling. We know, as well, that Jesus is a friend to women, respecting them in a manner that was almost unheard of in Biblical times. So how is it that he is okay with Mary’s act? Why does he leave her on the floor?

Something happens when Mary breaks that seal on the bottle. It’s like a bottle of wine, it can only be opened once, and then it must be drunk. People save rare or valuable bottles for years, waiting for an occasion special enough to merit the extravagance, with the obvious result that sometimes, they never get drunk. We don’t know where Mary’s ointment came from, where she got it or why she had it in the first place. We don’t know how long she had been saving it, or what motivated her to reach for it off the shelf that day. But when the bottle is broken, and the liquid spilled, there is no going back. When she does this, she is performing an act of unmeasured, generous love for her friend. This is not about practical function. If Mary had thought that she simply needed to find something with which to wash Jesus’ feet, there would have been many cheaper options. Plain water, perhaps, and a towel instead of her hair. No, this was patently not about washing feet. This was an act of love. And in love, there is no

cost-benefit analysis. It's unmeasured, extravagant. It does not know self-consciousness – if she had been worried about what others thought, she would have kept her hair tightly braided. She gave of everything for her friend. And the smell of the ointment hangs in the air for all to drink in.

There is a well-known secular story that demonstrates this type of unrestrained love. The famous short-story writer O. Henry gives a story that is often told at Christmastime. There was a young couple, a woman who had beautiful, long flowing hair, and a man whose most cherished possession was his gold pocket watch. When it came time for Christmas, neither one had any money for gifts. So, the man sold his pocket watch to buy the woman a tortoise-shell comb for her hair. What the woman wanted was to get the man a platinum fob for his pocket watch – and so she cut off her hair and sold it to earn the money.

I didn't study this story in school, but I do know it from another telling – I want to show you a video of two other friends who found themselves in a similar predicament.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqsGKPYSJTA> 3:59-6:48

These stories act out a profound desire to give to the other person – no cost is too high, and when the act is done, the only regret is that there is nothing more to give. Love is like this, and when Jesus finally responds to Judas, that's exactly what he says. He knows his time is coming, as he says "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." It sounds a little pompous to us, really, but Jesus is right to say it. If we do not act out our love for those around us while they are here, we will be left only with regret. And for that love to be true, it must be extravagant, unlimited, flowing to the floor with no thought for the consequences. Jesus understands this, and Mary understands this. Says Jesus, this woman gets it, she understands the truth.

We do not need to worry that Mary is on the floor, because Jesus lifts her up. Of all the important men gathered in the room, Mary alone is the one who gets it. And though she does not say a word, Jesus names her as a speaker of the truth. Don't forget that this is a time when women were considered to be too dumb to understand, they were not reliable messengers. Jesus tells us that the bearer of the truth is the woman who risked embarrassment and poverty – who gave her most valuable possession, who allowed herself to be seen with hair unbound, to show her love for her friend who was soon to die.

In our own story, we are most often tempted to be Judas, there is no question about that. But this is Lent. Soon we will be entering to Jerusalem, and experiencing the most powerful moments of our collective story. And the shocking, extravagant, even scandalous love of Mary is just the beginning of the self-giving that we are about to experience. And so we remember them all – the woman with the comb, the man with the pocket watch, Ernie, Bert and Mary – as we journey ahead to the cross.

Amen.