

“The Silence and the Scandal”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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John 12:1-8

(In case you’re reading, not watching, this, I’ve included some notes that will hopefully help give a better sense of the congregation’s experience.)

[Say nothing for 15 seconds] If I stood here and said nothing . . . [10 seconds of silence] and if I stayed silent long enough, say 30 seconds . . . [5 seconds of silence] imagine how fast the tension in this room would go up. Minds would try to fill in the void, guessing why. What’s wrong? Has he lost his voice, forgotten his sermon? Is he searching for the right words to tell us something that might be hard for him to say, something that might be hard for us to hear? And the longer the silence, the greater the desire to break it: coughs; the clearing of throats, fidgeting in those creaky pews.

Now imagine the silence as Mary smeared expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair. I wonder how long that silence lasted. This wasn’t normal. In that room, jaws dropped, eyes wide and bulging, minds churning. What do you say? What do you do? This is a very intimate gesture, verging on the sexual, and this is neither the time nor the place for it. We’re trying to eat here!

And into that stunned silence, a marvelous scent blossomed, beautiful but overwhelming, like a pound of incense dumped into a hot thurible, the aroma so thick that it choked off words. And as that sacred moment grew, the impulse built to ask why, to say stop. And the silence was shattered by Judas.

“What a waste,” he complained. “What a terrible waste. Do you have any idea how many poor people this could have fed?” Keeper of the common purse, he quickly calculated the

cost, 300 denarii, about a year's wages. It was not an unreasonable objection. Which is more important, Jesus having well-moisturized, sweet-smelling feet, or hundreds of hungry people fed?

Of course, John says that what really made Judas mad was that he was skimming off the top. Converting that nard into cash would have been a pretty good score for him. But I doubt Judas was the only one thinking what he said. A corrupt motive doesn't necessarily undermine a genuine complaint. A big part of the Jesus Movement was caring for the poor.

So imagine the silence that fell when Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." What do you say to that? John doesn't tell us. He leaves the space blank and quickly moves to the next scene. But I can imagine a very long pause around that dinner table.

First, it doesn't make any sense to say that Mary bought the nard to anoint Jesus' dead body, because he was very much alive when she used it. In fact, it would be six more days before Jesus died, and nobody there even knew that, which must have made what Jesus said even more confusing. Then there's the second part, so scandalous, so insensitive and selfish. "Tonight, it's all about me. Worry over the poor tomorrow." Complete contradiction to what Jesus taught and did.

Many bright people over the years have sought ways to explain away those uncomfortable words, and a few have come up with good ideas to unravel the enigma of what Jesus said, but I think it's best to sit in silence with the scandal, because all too often we think we've got Jesus pegged, and then like a slap in the face, he changes tack, and there's nothing to say or do but stay silent and feel scandalized.

But how we've let go of the scandal, or to be more precise, we've not let it go so much as we've cast it out like a demon. We like our Jesus tame: predictable, consistent, and unthreatening. We don't come here to face a God who shakes us up. We want a moment's peace, calm in the storm, and I understand that. I want it, too, and we receive it. This place inspires awe and reverence. The liturgy of our worship vibrates to a different rhythm, helping us get back in sync with God. To share in this fellowship is to feel the enfolding embrace of God's love. All of those are precious gifts, but if we come here to escape the hard stuff, we could not have possibly chosen a worse place, because Jesus is scandalous.

It's ironic, really, how we lose sight of that in a world obsessed with scandal. So much time and energy given to the juicy details of the athlete on performance-enhancing drugs or the celebrity getting divorced or going into rehab. Yet somehow we miss the biggest scandal of them all.

There was once a man who came from God, who was God, and he got hot and cold and hungry and thirsty and irritated just like everybody else. Sometimes, he felt abandoned and misunderstood, valued not so much for the truth he taught as for the wonders he wrought. He raised up the lowly, smacked down the haughty, ate with the dirtiest of sinners, and let a woman clean his feet with her hair at dinner.

He made some men mad, the kind of men you don't want to make mad, because he had a vision. Actually, more than a vision, this man had a whole new reality to unleash, a new way of life, abundant and everlasting, one that set people free to live in peace, despite pain and indignity and cruelty.

Yet this way of life, this fresh form of freedom, demanded its own obedience, a shift in loyalty, a commitment to new responsibilities. And that could not be tolerated by the bosses.

“Who does he think he is, this charismatic trickster with no credentials, this hick from nowhere? Who is he to make such claims, to offer promises beyond the wildest of dreams?” Jesus was a troublemaker, an upstart intent on upending the ways things were. So offensive, so potentially dangerous, so scandalous that they killed him.

And that’s who we worship? That’s who we pledge our lives to, more or less? This guy nailed up naked on a cross? Scandalous. And then we tell these stories about how he came back from the dead, burst out of the tomb, and every year we make a big deal out of it, unless we have something better to do or the weather’s bad. And we’ve got no hard proof. We just choose that story over all the others, most of which make more sense than the one we’ve got. Makes a foot rub at a dinner party look passé.

And then this guy who came from heaven and got killed and climbed out of the grave three days later, this guy we theoretically give our lives to, we all too often forget. Things go on mostly as before. Life’s so noisy, and much as we might complain about it, there’s something compelling, something enticing and exciting about that. So we get distracted and forget the story. We forget because we can’t hear, and we can’t hear because we don’t listen, because to listen we must make the time and effort to shove away that noise. And deep down where it really matters, we know that once the noise is gone, there’s only silence, awkward and unfamiliar and empty and scary.

It’s hard to seek silence. When it occurs to me that it’s time for a little quiet meditation, part of me starts to channel a version of Winston Churchill’s famous “Fight on the Beaches” speech. “We will clean out the gutters, and do the taxes. We will trim the trees and tidy up the basement. We will never sit silent!” But if we can give ourselves to that sacred scandalous silence, and it takes practice, and the first few tries aren’t usually that great, what a blessing.

What a blessing to be suspended in a single moment where seconds don't exist, where there's no tick-tick-tick to chip away at our sanity. It's a sacred scandal, that silence, where whispers emerge. "I am about to do a new thing . . . do you not perceive it?" "Christ has made me his own. I want to know . . . the power of his resurrection."

Or there may be no whispers at all, not the slightest sound, only a Presence, a pulsating energy that fills us up until we break open and takes us out of time to enjoy a sliver of eternity. It cannot be described or even imagined, only experienced, and it's free to any who want to be free. The silence is there waiting for those ready to wait for it. Amen.