

The Aroma of Kindness

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert D. Flanagan for the
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C, John 20:1-8

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.”

Many have speculated about Mary’s actions after dinner at Lazarus’s house. Some see her as prescient, knowing the suffering Jesus will endure in the coming days. Others see her as a dedicated follower, anticipating his donkey ride through the gate into the Holy City. Perhaps it was she who alerted people to Jesus’s royal entry and encouraged them to lay down cloaks and palm branches. Still, others see her as Jesus’s lover. She wiped his feet with her hair as if this public act was overt foreplay. Each of these may hold some truth.

My view is simpler. Jesus went to see his friends Martha, Lazarus, and Mary. They lived in the small town of Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. No more than a day’s walk. He wanted to catch up with them and see how Lazarus was doing. He died and rose from the dead, after all. Jesus might have also enjoyed Martha’s cooking, and she loved to prepare a big meal for her friends. If Jesus hadn’t stopped by when he was in town, they would have been disappointed. It would have been rude of Jesus not to have visited his friends.

While it might pique our interest to think of Jesus and Mary as lovers, frankly we can’t know. Examining the Gospel accounts, we are led to conclude that their relationship was more likely a friendship. As Jesus’s friend and a person of intuition and empathy, we can see Mary acting as a friend.

That night, might Jesus have been a bit withdrawn during the meal? Might he have had a lot on his mind and not fully present? Was Jesus stressed, anticipating what he was about to do in Jerusalem? It’s not a stretch to conclude he was.

Mary, then, was a caring friend. She sensed Jesus’s mood and saw the stress on his face. She didn’t need to ask him what the matter was. That was not her way. She instead got some of her nard and began to anoint his feet.

John’s account described the nard as a costly perfume. But nard was more than something that smelled nice. It had been used as an herbal medicine for centuries. Nard comes from a plant grown in the Himalayas, which is why it was so costly. Spikenard, as it is also called, is a plant in the valerian family. It has anti-inflammatory properties and is good for the skin. It also relieves anxiety and helps with sleep. If someone was stressed with a lot on his or her mind, then nard was a good solution.

Mary anointed Jesus’s feet because she cared for him. She sensed her friend’s need and found a solution. While she could have been thinking of Jesus’s royal entrance or his immanent death—I wonder how she would have known either of those—she was just as likely being her usual kind and observant self. Sometimes our biblical commentators want to see more in the Scriptures than is there, which clouds our view.

Two thoughts come to mind when I think of Mary, the observant, kind friend. Her action gives us a model of caring friendship, and she gives us permission to take care of ourselves.

Mary's action shows us a way to respond to the grace that is Jesus. She exemplifies the Christian life that recognizes what Jesus has done for us through his life, teachings, and sacrifice. She also shows us how to act toward others who are in need. She illustrates for us the way to live a life filled with gratitude, by giving ourselves in service to Jesus and in turn to the world. Mary's action also sheds light on evil. Judas criticized her kindness and publicly shamed her. Jesus swiftly rebuked him for it. Mary shows us how to be people of transformation.

But what if we don't have a "Mary" nearby? Imagine you're heading into a difficult week at work and find yourself tired and distracted. Mary's action and Jesus receptivity to it give us permission to care for our souls. It's not okay to incessantly indulge ourselves in excessive expressions of self-absorption. It is, however, entirely appropriate to pause and care for our bodies and spirits. We must be self-aware, evaluating what we're doing. We have both physical and mental limits that when crossed leave us exhausted. Living at our limits might be exhilarating, but on that edge, we risk making a decision that will harm ourselves and others.

That is the beauty of Jesus's acceptance of Mary's kindness. He allowed her to take care of him. The nard's aroma calmed him and the others in the room. He slept well that night and got the rest he needed. Holy week loomed, and so did Calvary. Mary gave him a bit of the grace he gave to us all.

When we see a friend stressed, we can model our actions after Mary, caring for our friend. Indulging them in a gift of grace. We can do the same for ourselves, finding ways to care for our bodies and spirit, allowing us to be ready for the challenges we face in our lives.

Sources:

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