

Mary's Healing Touch

John 12:1-8 by Patty Friesen (April 7/19)

The account of the anointing of Jesus' feet has some very different details between the gospels. Matthew and Mark place this event at the house of Simon the leper with an unnamed woman coming with her alabaster jar whom history assumed was Mary Magdalene the penitent prostitute. John's Gospel has Jesus at the house of his raised friend Lazarus with his good friend Mary of Bethany being the one to anoint his feet. It is interesting to speculate why the early gospel writers were not in agreement over these important details - namely who anointed Jesus and where and why. Either way, it is a culturally scandalous story.

First of all, in John's Gospel, Jesus is eating at the house of someone who was dead which is a ritually unclean act. Lazarus isn't a prominent actor in this story—he has no dialogue—but John tells us twice that he's there, not just in the house, but at the table. This scene gives new meaning to hosting a Death Dinner. In The Last Temptation of Christ movie, Nikos Kazantzakis paints a grisly picture of the resuscitated Lazarus, his compromised body a constant reminder of the grave whence he came. Carrie Newcomer's song "Lazarus" adds great pathos for this man who's not sure he's glad to be back: "I'm the one who owes much / But whom no one will touch. / Mothers see me and cry / Dogs bare teeth as I walk by."

What matters is that Lazarus is not shunted off to the back room. He's at the table with Jesus—and with Judas. It is a similar intimate eating scene to the Last Supper. Perhaps Lazarus's presence is what prompts Mary to anoint Jesus without delay. She has known the sting of death; her brother sits there as a living reminder. She

pours out the burial perfume precisely at the time when people won't understand, when it will be seen as an eccentric extravagance. It is a protest against the order of things; in its own way, it's a protest against death itself.

Pure nard, of course, would not evoke warm memories for Mary and Martha's dinner guests. It would call to mind loved ones' deceased bodies, prepared for the grave. Judas asks why the nard wasn't sold for a pretty penny and the money given to charity. A more apt question might be why Mary didn't use it on her brother Lazarus, dead just a few days before.

We hear of Mary of Bethany in Luke's gospel, chapter 10 when Mary sits at Jesus' feet to learn from him, a radical act for a female learning Torah the word of God while her sister Martha more culturally appropriately works in the kitchen and tells Jesus to tell Mary to help her but Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better way. We know already that Mary of Bethany was a devout, risk-taking disciple. So it is no surprise that she would do this risky inappropriate act of anointing Jesus' feet with expensive burial perfume and wiping them with her exposed hair. By wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, Mary ensures that the fragrance will linger on her own body in the days to come. This memory will cling to her when her friend is taken in the middle of the night, when he's convicted on trumped-up charges, when he pours out his life and forgiveness on the cross. Perhaps the nard and touching Jesus will give her strength to face such things.

Dr. Victoria Sweet in her memoir *God's Hotel*, writes about her quest for understanding the spiritual connection of in her patients. She turned to the 12th century Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen who not only experienced God in visions but who

also served as a caretaker of the sick. Hildegard of Bingen touched fevered foreheads, took urine samples, measured pulse and wrote about it in a medical journal. Through medicine, Hildegard found a physical spiritual connection necessary for healing.

At the Hotel of God, a San Francisco hospital for the homeless, Dr. Sweet experimented with physical/spiritual connection and her patients responded with surprising vitality. Touching the sick became not a merely a means to probe for a diagnosis but a way to impart a blessing. We recognize instinctively the importance of ethical, permitted touch for recovery and resilience. Touch is a highly empathetic sense as Mary of Bethany knew.

Touch is central to our human experience, yet there is no getting away from the fact that we cannot touch God. In the Creation of Adam by Michelangelo, there is an unresolved space between the fingers of Adam and God. They do not touch. God's hand is outstretched while Adam's is lazily raised. We may often feel like the reverse is true, that we are stretching while God is just waiting for us to try a bit harder.

Many times in scripture we see images of God as holding, carrying or embracing us and we naturally feel this comfort, as the father of the prodigal son, who ran to him threw his arms around him and kissed him. We need these touching images of God, through Jesus who healed by touch. Touch is also holy as the point of contact with what is real. Just think of Doubting Thomas who had to touch Jesus' wounds to be connected to the reality of resurrection. Many people like to work in a garden to feel real through touching earth.

Touch is holy because it plants our feet on God's created earth, on the dirt from which we are formed. It reminds us that a human and divine act of touch brings us into

existence, that we were created and formed from earth and God's hands. Touch is making real and believing it to be so which is why we touch those who have died to say goodbye. We know by the feel of their rock hard waxy hands that indeed they are gone. We can believe it because we have touched them. We touch our dead and we touch our living. And since Art's death and Patrick's absence, I've really needed to hold fat church babies – to be reminded of life and love in a physical form. I love it that parents regularly lose their babies at church as they ride around in other church members' arms.

Healing touch on the outside helps the healing reconstruction of cells and souls on the inside. This week begins the journey to Good Friday and Easter where we remember the opposite of Mary's healing touch for Jesus in the wounding, piercing, crucifying touch of soldiers. When Jesus rose from the dead, he still bore the marks of these injuries. He was scarred for life. These marks were the way he proved his identity to his disciples and the way he identified with all of created humanity. Through touching Jesus' own injury, scarring and recovery in our imagination and in scripture, we pray for the healing of our own wounds - physical and spiritual. In our lives of stress and burden we all carry scars, but we are alive and we are being made whole, as we are formed in the image of Christ.

Touch is holy. It is life affirming to our humanity and central to our connection to God and others. In a touch-sensitive world, we must certainly be wise, but also fierce in our courage to touch. As we hold babies, shake hands and pass the peace of Christ, we are practicing appropriate, permitted touch that can be empathetic moments of solidarity and healing. We will have opportunity for anointing for healing this morning.

George and I will be available for those who are able to come to the front and we will serve those in the pews who raise their hands.

Let us pray: O God, we come to you at this moment because you love us. You know us more deeply than we know ourselves. You desire wholeness for each of your children in body, mind and spirit. We come before you praying for healing in each of our lives.

McKibben Dana, Fifth Sunday of Lent, Christian Century, February 23, 2016

Pavey, Reimagining Touch as Spiritual Practice, Canadian Mennonite, April 15, 2013

Long, Healing Hands, Christian Century, October 17, 2012