

Monday, March 30, 2026

Monday In Holy Week

Solemn Eucharist

5:30 pm

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A Sermon by
Professor Sarah Coakley

on

Isaiah 42:1-9; John 12:1-11

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Address 2: Gift*From 'The Journey of Desire: Passion, Temptation and Transformation'*

'Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment' (John 12. 3)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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I spoke last night of the matter of invitation: the invitation to these days of Passion, of the choice laid before us by Jesus recalling Isaiah's great vision of a vineyard made for love which has been despoiled by sin. I spoke of Jesus's stark and still unexpected warning that to follow him back into that luscious vineyard where death now tragically awaits the Son of the owner, will involve an overturning of all reasonable, just, expectations about rewards and punishments which those of us who long to keep our religion tidy still yearn for, even now. I spoke of our inevitable resistance and aversion, therefore, to the *costliness* of what lies before us if we dare this year to step once more into that realm where all religious rationality is seemingly reversed, where meaning is stopped and human control comes to the end of its resources.

And so tonight, as we start to follow John's gospel into the heart of this unfolding story, that question of costliness and loss of control becomes our first focus in the most striking fashion, and it comes in the form of an excessive and 'costly' *gift* by a woman: a whole pound of pure nard wasted, and an exuberant expression of human love almost calculated to cause scandal and offence. For here in John's Gospel (as also, although rather differently, in Mark and Matthew) the very Passion starts, most curiously and even embarrassingly (let us not beat around the bush), with a woman making a fool of herself in public.

What are we to make of this? Let us reflect awhile tonight on this question of gift, its connection to this woman, and its integral relation to the logic of desire in the Passion.

In the matter of everyday gift, there is usually, isn't there? – even if somewhat unconsciously – a negotiation at stake: the anthropologists call it '*do ut des*'. That is: 'I give to you (a box of chocolates, a job, a mortgage), in order that you give back to me (either now or later)'; and therein lies an economy of exchange which – some say – forms the very basis of all stable communities. I know whom I'm beholden to – and so do you. I also know who deserves punishment when someone reneges on the gift – and so do

you. We are engaged in a continual round of such negotiations, amongst individuals, families, colleagues, and indeed societies and nations. According to many, it's what makes the world go around: gift and response, generosity and debt. We keep the accounts. And though it's a well kept secret, by and large we like to run our religions this way, too, because it gives us at least some sense of control. Note that in its more subtle forms this type of exchange by no means rules out either *generosity* or *discretion*: on the contrary, I can tithe, and even tithe with modesty and secrecy, in this same spirit, in the sure confidence that I have thereby left some good credit in the divine accounting system. The Protestant reformation was of course an attempt to shatter this whole business altogether; but we may well ask, even now, if it fully succeeded.

But in such traditional economies of exchange, as many have noted, it is women who do not obviously fit in very well. If they cannot join the game of exchange themselves as autonomous agents, or are even debarred from it (as was certainly true in the time of Jesus), there are seemingly only two options remaining to them: they may become themselves the objects of sexual barter, one of the items of male exchange; or – at the other extreme – they may attempt to escape and even undermine the whole economy through an excessive form of gift which is their very own. When a woman lover continues to be faithful to the memory of someone long-lost, to pray for him even in rejection, we see this excess of gift; when a mother continues to love a son who is violent and lawless, we see it again. Such excess leaves us with a deep sense of moral ambiguity, a suspicion that such love is nonsensical, damaging, potentially open to abuse, and certainly outside the pale of 'sense and sensibility'. As indeed it is. So perhaps it is really just the stuff of deranged or *sinful* women, then?

How striking it is that, in John's version of this story, it is Mary of Bethany, whose brother Lazarus Jesus has just raised from the dead, who offers here both her gratitude for that intervention, and her grief at Jesus's impending Passion, in such an excessive and costly show of love. This is certainly no gift of the gift-exchange economy, that's for sure: there is nothing obvious to be hoped for out of it. Yet this is also no wild, repentant sinner in action, either, as in the Luke's quite different version of the story, later – significantly – associated with the former sinner, Mary Magdalene. No, here in John, this is the very Mary of contemplative reflection and prayerful friendship from Bethany, suddenly gone wild: Mary 'who chose the better part', now engaged in a quite intentional act of excess and grief. And this is not oil to the head as in Matthew and Mark, either, as if to confirm Jesus's Messianic status; but oil to the feet – an act of extravagance and even suggestiveness, as we know from parallel cases in the pagan world – from Aristophanes, from Pliny, from Petronius. And the hair is down, too, and flowing to mop up the feet: the erotic overtones are implicit but clear. Theodore of Mopsuestia, writing in Syriac in the early fifth century, puts it thus, and with great beauty: '... it was as if the woman planned this so as to attach the fragrance of our Lord's flesh to her body. For she took care that she should always be with him: she did this in her love so that if she should come to be separated from him, by this she could suppose he was with her still'. The mingling of hair, oil, skin are this stuff of gift beyond exchange.

It might make you laugh to know what 20th century biblical commentators have made of all this: John's version of this story is 'clearly secondary', it is said (only a fallen women, as in Luke, would behave like this); it is 'totally anomalous', 'unintelligible', 'absurd' and even 'utter nonsense'. Yet why then does Jesus commend this action? It is Judas, note, who in John's version does the sums here, returning the issue immediately to one of charity in the modern sense: this is a waste, the poor are always with us. Poor Judas, for he doesn't get it, this gift beyond gift: we'll return to him, and stand alongside him too, later this week.

But when Jesus commends Mary here with such gentle loveliness (*aphes heauten*: ‘Let her be’), his answer can only mean that it is in our deepest experiences of human love and grief, wrested to extremes and beyond all calculation, that we are first drawn into the true meaning of the Passion. Indeed, here, with this excessive form of gift, we *must* start, if we are to tread this way of the transformation of desire. Men too, let it be said – though it is a well kept secret – also love like this, albeit in our culture they hate to show it. But Jesus will show us so with dominical power later this week, by extending this so-called ‘feminine’ logic of a gift that exceeds all barter with his very own form of feet-washing, his very own form of intimate, loving, excess.

‘Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment ...’ Tonight this sweet fragrance of love is fully accepted by Jesus as he turns to face his own death. It is a gift of gratitude and grace, no less than of anguish and grief. And if we want to know the meaning of Passion, if we want to be mingled with Christ, as Theodore of Mopsuestia so beautifully put it, this we have to learn to do: it gives off a sweet fragrance that bespeaks all the costliness of love, and the desire for an intimacy beyond death. Tonight we stand in this lush fragrance that reminds us again of the original vineyard of love: we step forward hesitantly, wondering what it will mean. We bring all our own excessive, broken, damaged and lost loves, and we see anew, and with wonder, that Jesus accepts them; and not only accepts them but makes of them the necessary stuff of the opening of his Passion. Only Good Friday will show that, rightly understood, such excessive gift is not marginalized as ‘feminine’, nor an invitation to abuse or be abused, nor even a misplaced form of idolatry, but rather a ‘deeper magic’ beyond all human calculation, a divine rationality beyond all human reason. Tomorrow we shall begin to understand why, as Jesus instructs us in what it is for love to be ‘lifted up on a cross’. But tonight we leave our own hopeless gifts, like wasted nard, at Jesus’s feet, and wait for the unfolding of his new meaning of love. *Amen*.
