

Sisters of Mercy

5th Sunday in Lent; March 21, 2010

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Idlewild Presbyterian Church

John 12:1-11

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany,
the home of Lazarus,*

whom he had raised from the dead.

There they gave a dinner for him.

Martha served,

and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard,

anointed Jesus' feet,

and wiped them with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples,

(the one who was about to betray him), said,

“Why was this perfume not sold for 300 denari and

the money given to the poor?”

(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but

because he was a thief; he kept the common purse

and used to steal what was put into it.)

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.”

When the great crowd of the Jews

learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus

but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

So the chief priests planned

to put Lazarus to death as well,

since it was on account of him that many of the Jews

were deserting and

were believing in Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Martha and Mary are two sisters who live in Bethany, a village a few miles outside of Jerusalem. It's the home of Simon the Leper, Simon the Pharisee, and near the Jordan River where John the Baptist cried, "Prepare the way for the Lord."

Martha and Mary are artisan sisters living on the margins of Jerusalem, artisans who know how to prepare the way. And they've come to this knowledge through trust.

Martha is a doer — an artist who works the canvas of the ordinary — making sure there's rice in the salt shaker for humid days. Mary, is a thinker — an artist who works with the brushstrokes of reflection — sitting at the feet of Christ she observes the way the road's dust accumulates around his ankles. Martha is busy with the details getting things right within the framework of a household. Mary is satisfied to find details in the minutia of a landscape. What both sisters know is that paying attention to details makes a difference in how their lives unfold.

Today marks the fifth Sunday of Lent. Lent is a time in the church when we intentionally walk through the wilderness with Jesus — Jesus who has set his face to Jerusalem and his inevitable death. He knew it was coming and we do too.

Martha and Mary had recently been in the wilderness when their brother, Lazarus, was sick and perceived as dead. Along the way, at separate times, they cried out to Christ, "If only you had been here, Lord — our brother would not have died." Jesus met the sisters in their wilderness — and taught them something about trust.

Martha and Mary cried like Hagar — they all cried for health, for wholeness and for life. A thousand years before, sent into the wilderness by Abraham to abandon their son, Hagar cried, "Please Lord. Do not let me look upon the death of my son." God met Hagar in the wilderness. Hagar learned to trust God. For the sisters, Lazarus had died and with each breath they inhaled the stench of his death and cried out in mourning — maybe not able to trust in fullness.

Although Jesus said of Lazarus, "This is for God's glory" — the full humanity of Jesus was in part made real in his presence and merciful response to the sisters. Martha and Mary saw their Teacher, Jesus the human, weeping.

Although Jesus said of himself, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" — Martha and Mary saw their guide, Jesus the human, greatly disquieted.

Out of the wilderness that included the Lord's weeping and disquietedness — Martha and Mary witness God's glory in new life when their brother is restored to wellness; when their brother is made whole — when Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go." Martha and Mary lean into trusting Jesus.

Martha and Mary have seen Jesus — fully human, fully Divine — their misery over death is transformed into mercy. Jesus connects on a human level and these sisters are able to live in a new way — with deep trust in God's providence.

The reality of the human condition is that we live with brokenness and trouble, hurt and pain — and in the midst of our humanity, it is hard to trust. Whether it's a festering appendix or a ruptured relationship, each new day presents with opportunities to know the depth of our individual humanity, to look inside ourselves and to be open to the details of encounters with Christ like mercy, to be open to trusting in some One beyond ourselves.

Some days I know it better than others, but I know the desire and the joy of being restored to wellness; of being made whole; of being unbound and let go. Sometimes wholeness comes in simple ways — like this week Betsy, our 18 year old, and I had a bad morning. She didn't get up. I was angry. She grumped. I huffed. We both left the house without another word. Later in the day she sent a text message — “It makes me very sad when my mornings go the way this one did. Because of our schedules, I rarely see you at home and the most routine sighting is early in the morning — so when said sighting is feisty and hostile, it doesn't make for a good send off. I'm sorry that my lethargy is frustrating. I love you very, very much.” Because Betsy paid attention to the ways in which I rejected her — she was able to mend the error of my ways with mercy and together we were made well — in God's trusting love and providence.

Martha and Mary know the power, freedom and mercy born of an encounter with Christ. When Jesus comes along six days before the Passover — the sisters can act with a certain intimacy born of deep trust — they can be who they are as lovers of God — those who pay attention and trust in what they do and see. And these sisters, along with their brother, make an evening meal for their Lord who has traveled to a sacred place, a home on the margins of Jerusalem, a home of hospitality nurtured in trust.

Martha makes sure there's salt in the shakers. Mary remembers the detail of the road dust on Christ's feet. She moves toward Christ and without fear, uses her vision in service with Christ. In an intimate, sensual and merciful act she pours out an abundant blessing of costly ointment over Christ's road worn feet and caresses them gently with her hair.

The entire home is filled with the fragrance of the merciful actions of Mary — who in her service with Mary has moved to do more than just watch — but to act in mercy. Martha and Mary work together to prepare a way for Christ to make his way to his impending death. Judas responds to these acts of mercy with his garrulous protest that leads to Christ's defense of Mary's anointing, “Leave her alone.” Christ affirms acts of mercy.

I used to meet with a group of clergy women. We'd drink some wine, share warm, freshly baked bread and practice liturgies we'd write. This particular season we'd been writing liturgies about how we came to encounter God in the details of our senses. One particular night, our liturgy had centered on the sense of taste.

We'd had some wine, tasted some bread, indulged in chocolate and crafted and celebrated our liturgy on the gift of taste. We knew what was coming but not how it would unfold. The time was at hand.

The black leather box was opened while two of us figured out which plastic guard would best slip over the stainless blade; how to snap the guard into place over the blade and the most efficient way to extend the electrical cord to reach to the wall outlet. Others shuffled a sheet onto the ground, set up a chair in the middle of the sheet and pulled chairs into an outer circle.

We invited one of our group members diagnosed with cancer into the center of the circle. We invited her to receive our embrace and live into the sure expectancy of no more post-chemo shedding onto the laptop; no more shedding into her food; no more shedding all over her pillow. Leonard Cohen's voice canted, "Oh the sisters of mercy, they are not departed or gone. They were waiting for me when I thought that I just can't go on."

Sitting in a circle, surrounding one another, we had been invited into sacred and vulnerable space. Together with one another we were sisters of mercy, as the clippers hummed from the base of her neck up to the crown of head; her chemo-weakened hair fell to the ground. We were careful of the details of the curves of her unique and beautifully shaped head, carefully we caressed her newly naked scalp after shaving row after row. We anointed her head with oil scented with nard after we finished. From many of us, tears dripped, and together we wiped away one another's tears.

This was the church about the work of being present in wilderness, in a simple gesture and an individual's willingness to be open to receive care. Hands were laid on a knee or a shoulder, but together as we leaned into the task at hand, sometimes awkward laughter rose from piercing silence. "O the sisters of mercy they are not departed or gone. They were waiting for me when I thought that I just can't go on."

We were one another's sisters of mercy that night. We all participated in the work of moving through the wilderness of a diagnosis of cancer and movement in the midst of healing. Some were doers, others were thinkers that night. As we were ending our evening, recovering from the power and awe of God at work with us, one member said, "You know, if we put her hair out in the garden, the birds will come and gather it to construct their nests." Picking up clumps of discarded hair, we moved out under a night sky illumined with the moon, brushing off the visible reminder of illness. The next morning and email to our group proclaimed, "Sitting in my old porch chair, having a breakfast of oatmeal and a cup of tea, I watched tufts of hair floating in the morning sky."¹

To be artisans of trust like Martha and Mary is to practice the ways of faith — it's preparing the way, it's crying out to God, it's having intimate encounters with Christ, it's receiving the restoration he offers, and offering it back to those in need. We are the church. Will we serve and reflect as brothers and sisters of mercy? "O, the sisters of mercy — they are not departed or gone. They were waiting for me when I thought that I just couldn't go on."

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¹ Previously published *Call to Worship, Healing and Wholeness, Volume 43.2, Sisters of Mercy*