

Anointed

One “fun” thing about following Jesus is that, many times, when you feel like you have him figured out, he comes back and tells you that you’ve actually got it wrong. There are a lot of good things that come from us Christians deciding to do as our slogan says “care more,” Christian charity does a lot of good things in this hurting world of ours, so I don’t want you to think that we’re off the hook for continuing that tradition. I certainly don’t want you to just bail on Lifestyles and Safe Nights and all that stuff we do that is to help the poor, but I’m going to tell you what Jesus told his disciples: poverty is a black hole that you can never fill. The belly of Mammon is insatiable, and unless we somehow create a world where money is not the ruling principle, you will always have the poor.

Is Jesus okay with that? No, no he is not. He tells people things like you cannot serve two masters, the one scene where we see him getting really honestly outraged involved moneychangers in the temple. I believe that when we follow Jesus, we should become much more suspicious of economic systems and the way things seem to have to be regarding material wealth. There’s a reason that the very first churches were pretty much communist in the purest sense of the word, they gave all they had for the good of the community. And there is a reason why the first arguments and struggles that we hear about in those churches are actually about how to make that work. And there is a reason that it didn’t last for very long.

As a point of fact, the trouble with communism even in an ideologically pure form, is that humans are well... human. Judas held the common purse for a little group of people who had Jesus actually there with them, and he was a thief. I would have thought Jesus would have been a better administrator than that. Then again, I guess trusting Judas had more consequences than just failing the yearly audit. But even if he wasn’t a thief, his criticism of Mary still illustrates a problem that we suffer from to this day: we think our job is to do good things, we think our mission is to be helpers and charity superstars, and while those things are good and noble goals, our first purpose as Christians is to be changed.

Mary is changed because of Jesus. Mary, Martha and Lazarus, this family that Jesus has such a close connection with, keep coming up in these stories. They appear to be a respectable family; and Jesus shakes up their respectable family a bit. Mary may be the one who is changed the most, and I say that with full awareness that Jesus raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. Mary has made a scene before, when she was out there with the men, listening to Jesus when she should have been helping Martha in the kitchen, but this thing with the perfume goes beyond all reason.

So let’s talk cultural norms. I mentioned to you last week that in this culture, running was undignified because of the showing of ankles. You may or may not be aware that the lower extremities of the body, in those days were considered to be something to keep modestly covered. In the story of Ruth, when Ruth is trying to get hitched to Boaz, she goes and uncovers his feet. I’m not going to go so far as to say what that actually means with kids in the room, but let’s just say there is a certain intimacy to the gesture, that perhaps in our world of flip flops and Bermuda shorts, we just don’t appreciate. So it is with Mary doing this thing to Jesus, touching his feet, wiping them with her hair, a sign of deep humility yes, but also astonishing intimacy. It took a lot of gall for her to do this, it put both her respectability and Jesus’ respectability into question.

Judas comes up with the gripe about the money, but I guarantee you he wasn’t the only one in the room scandalized by what just happened. At some point along the road, being a follower of Jesus became a

respectable thing to do, and maybe it shouldn't be. Jesus was, after all, a rebel, who challenged the way things were to such an extent that the institutional guardians felt it best that he be gotten gone. Jesus challenged the gaping maw of greed and power, he stood in the face of bottomless poverty and brokenness, and even in the face of death itself and said, "this is not what has to be." At some point we came to understand following Jesus as just belief, or worship, or something vague and spiritual that can be easily sanitized. Let's keep it clean-cut and respectable, let's give money and do good works, let's not have scandalous women smashing expensive perfume bottles and then sobbing all over Jesus feet, in front of a bunch of shocked people.

What Mary does is attempt to express how important Jesus is to her, and words just aren't going to cut it. This is the action of a person who has let go of herself entirely. She isn't worrying about how it looks or what it costs, she isn't worried about decorum or what people might say, she is performing a sacrament, right there in front of all the men who are supposed to know the most about what Jesus is doing, and they are mostly shocked and appalled about it. There is plenty of time and opportunity to do good for the poor, to engage in respectable, civil minded service. The church has gotten rather good at that, but sometimes we need to get a little scandalous in showing how much Jesus has broken our lives open.

Has Jesus changed your life? Maybe a thing we need to do as a church is to figure out some ways to show it that aren't quite so polite and respectable. The most straightforward meaning of the word Messiah is God's anointed one. The act of anointing is meant to signify change. In what Mary does, she is anointing Jesus' feet, yes, but she is also, significantly having her head anointed. It is an act of audacity and humility, it is intimate, symbolic and it is misinterpreted by most of the people in the room, but it is essential to who we are as a church. We may not have Jesus sitting here, but we have his body and blood to remind us of what we are. We are called to take whatever we have that is of value and pour it out, and in turn we are anointed to be like Christ.