

They will know you are my disciples

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Foot washing, anointing of feet and Holy Week have all been on my mind recently. I have spent considerable time contemplating all this as I memorized the foot washing passage and wrote the storytelling sermon for Maundy Thursday that some of you saw at the Sunday evening storytelling event. If you missed that you can hear it again on Maundy Thursday and I hope you will come to that service.

Now the setting of the story in John's gospel is important. John places this event in Bethany at the house of Lazarus and names the woman as Mary one of his sisters. This is the same Mary we have heard from twice before. Once when she was at Jesus' feet and Martha complains that she has to do all the work in the kitchen. The second is where she challenges Jesus when he arrives after Lazarus has died and been in the tomb for four days. She also professes who Jesus really is at the tomb. She is the ultimate faithful follower.

The next passage in John is Jesus entering into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and all is finally set in motion that leads ultimately to the last supper, the cross and to the resurrection on Easter morning. Of note is the word used for dinner to describe the meal next appears in John in reference to the Last Supper. So John is clearly pointing towards the cross in his version of the story.

This story is told in two other gospels, but is different in several ways. The other versions have this happen at the house of Simon the Leper also in Bethany and the woman is not named. The only information offered is that she is a sinner.

By the way this woman was conflated by the early church, in particular Gregory the Great, with Mary Magdalene to create the story that Mary was a prostitute and to discredit her early leadership of the church particularly Johns' community probably in Ephesus. That however is a different story. Also note that there are four Marys involved in the events of Holy Week all different people. So when I refer to this Mary I will call her Mary of Bethany.

Now the fact that this story is set in one place in two Gospels and somewhere else in the John may cause some people to wonder what is going on. Remember that John's gospel is heavy on theology and less concerned with actual facts. John's Last Supper is not a Passover meal as in the Synoptic Gospels.

There are far more specifics in Johns' story and those specifics are important. Not only is Mary of Bethany named in this story but that it takes place in the house of Lazarus, whom Jesus has raised from the dead is important. Many do

not realize that in John's gospel the authorities are not only looking to get rid of Jesus, but they also are planning the death of Lazarus. Lazarus, living proof of Jesus' power even over death, cannot be left alive.

So what is the message in this passage? Imagine for a moment the scene that John sets. Jesus has arrived at the home of Lazarus and enters this familiar house. Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days and Jesus brought him back to life. Mary and Martha are there and we all suspect that Martha is cooking once again. They are all at dinner. They are laying on couches with their heads facing into the middle around the table where the food would be placed and the feet out behind them.

Mary who sat at Jesus' feet to hear him teach that day now comes over to his feet once again. She pours a jar of perfumed ointment on his feet and begins to wipe it with her hair. What an unusual act. Refined, cultured women would always have their hair up around men. Only common women would have their hair down. Imagine the scene in your mind. Imagine how you might be feeling watching this act. I found myself somewhat uncomfortable, puzzled, wondering what on earth was going on. Those emotions sent me to the foot washing in John that I'm memorizing. I have the same reaction to this story as to that one.

This passage is closely tied to the foot washing that happens just a few days later. In fact the next time Jesus is at a dinner with everybody is the last supper and he will get up take off his robe and tie a towel around his waist. He pours water in a basin and washes the feet of the disciples. Peter is extremely uncomfortable and protests, "You will not wash my feet." When Jesus finishes he asks them, "Do you know what I have done for you? You call me Lord and teacher and you are right for that is what I am. So if I your teacher and Lord have washed your feet so you should wash the feet of one another. I have set an example for you that what I have done for you , you should do to each other." Later he says, I give you one more commandment. That you should love one another. Just as I have loved you should have love one another. Everyone you will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

The words chosen in particular the verbs are identical between the two passages. We also see Judas in both stories. Here he objects to the waste of 300 denari, almost a years wages for the average worker. In the foot washing we hear that "the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot to betray Jesus."

This is also about preparation for burial. This act foreshadows what is to come. Remember that it was Mary who was worried about the stench at the tomb of Lazarus. A pound of perfume would permeate the entire house. Mostly however this is about the love that Jesus asks from all who follow him. "Everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

To be a disciple of Jesus one must show extravagant love to others. Mary defied Jewish custom by her actions of anointing and washing Jesus feet with her hair. Mary in her action of anointing Jesus was allowing God's grace, God's love to flow through her. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we too are asked to give extravagant love to the world, a world that more then ever needs the healing presence of Christ's love. We have been anointed by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news of Christ to our world. Jesus has told us how everyone will know us, by having love for one another.