

SLD03.07.05 Fourth Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 12:1- 8
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“Quiet Dynamite”

Today’s Gospel text tells the story of Mary of Bethany and her surprising and uncharacteristic behavior toward Jesus shortly before his death. In order to understand the magnitude and meaning of Mary’s actions, we need to explore in more detail just who Mary of Bethany is and what she’s like; her persona and personality. For my understanding of this Mary, I depend heavily on Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel’s book, The Women Around Jesus.¹ Moltmann-Wendel is a theologian who writes and teaches in Turbingen, Germany, where she lives with her husband, Jurgen, also a theologian, and their four children. And about Mary of Bethany, Moltmann-Wendel has this to say:

(quote) “Mary of Bethany suffers the fate of many women: her voice is not loud, what she says is not original, her story is not dramatic. Her behavior is not noticeable, her conduct is modest. She seems sympathetic, but soon people forget her name and confuse her with some other woman who has made more of an impression.” (end quote) (p.53)

Surely one of the contributing factors to this lack of a distinct picture of Mary of Bethany is related to her name. For in 1st century Palestine, the name ‘Mary’ was as pretty, and as common, a name as it is in our country today. In fact, in the New Testament there are six different Marys, many of whom have been blended and confused through the ages. So our first task this morning as I see it, is to sort through

¹ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, The Women Around Jesus, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1990, Chapter 2, “Mary of Bethany.”

the various Marys of the gospels to discover just who Mary of Bethany is, and who she is not.

The six distinct Marys mentioned in the New Testament are as follows: there's Mary, the mother of two disciples; Mary, who was a Christian in Rome; Mary the mother of John Mark, at whose home the early church meets; Mary of Bethany, who is Martha's sister and our protagonist today; and finally, the two most famous Marys: Mary, mother of Jesus, and Mary of the town of Magdala, also known as Mary Magdalene.

Now, thanks to the Da Vinci Code, we all know now if we didn't before, that Mary Magdalene has, throughout history, been wrongly but consistently identified as a profoundly sinful woman – redeemed, of course, through her relationship with Jesus, but nevertheless dragging around a dark and juicy past. Well, when Luke tells a similar anointing story in *his* gospel about Jesus and a sinful but 'nameless' woman, everybody assumes that the woman is Mary Magdalene. So by the time *John's* anointing story about Mary of Bethany rolls around, the Marys of the two stories simply fuse. As Moltmann-Wendel notes, "the shadow of Mary Magdalene virtually overwhelms Mary of Bethany." And why would it not? Next to the redacted exotic wickedness of the Magdalene, docile and plain Mary of Bethany fades even more into the background.

As a result, from the Middle Ages to the present day, Martha's sister Mary has often been mistaken to be Mary Magdalene. Through the ages, graphic artists, poets, even theologians, have fallen victim to this literary confusion, their output further diluting any possibility of a distinct identity for Mary of Bethany. Painters are forever portraying Martha and Mary Magdalene as sisters, this stereotyped pair (the housekeeper and the harlot) appearing again and again in legends, sermons and Hollywood movies. But

Martha's sister is *not* colorful, wicked bad girl of Magdala, but quiet, passive, innocuous Mary of Bethany.

There are other reasons why Mary of Bethany has such difficulty leading a life of her own. Says Moltmann-Wendell, "she does not fare much better in any of the other New Testament stories in which she appears." In Luke's story of Jesus' visit to Bethany (Luke 10), Martha is busy in the kitchen while Mary is the one sitting at Jesus' feet and listening. You can spin it either way as to which is the more noble of the women but inarguably Mary is the more passive.

Again, in John's story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11), it is Martha who runs out to greet Jesus while Mary remains at home with her guests. In both stories Martha dispenses sharp comments to her sister, Mary, judging her to be annoyingly tame and passive. 'The Teacher is here and is asking for you,' admonishes an irritated Martha in John 11. "She leaves me to do all the work!" Martha later complains to Jesus.

In all the gospels, from Mary herself we have only one remark, itself a repetition of what Martha has already said: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' (John 11:32) Otherwise, in all the New Testament, from Mary of Bethany there is nothing but tears, falling down at Jesus' feet, sitting at Jesus' feet, anointing Jesus' feet."

Faithful behavior? Perhaps. Self-effacing? Certainly. Impressive? Not particularly. Transforming? Probably not.

Still, many a preacher through the ages has lifted Mary of Bethany as a paragon of passive feminine spirituality. One describes her as a 'quiet, tranquil soul.' Another, as a model of the 'Christian' attitude toward suffering and death. Still another enthuses

about the fact that quiet Mary only comes to Jesus when she is called (disciple as lapdog, I suppose.) But in the rather unforgiving light of today's more egalitarian model of women and men, silent, passive, submissive Mary seems something more of a 50's dream than a Christian one. I like to think maybe that's why radical John decided to pen today's story in the first place – to sort of balance Mary's bland image with this her act of extraordinary, unrestrained extravagance.

The disciples have gathered for supper. Once again Martha is serving, and once again, Mary is not helping. And there is Jesus, reclining on a cushion at the table, Mary lounging nearby. When suddenly, moved by who knows what impulse, Mary takes a flask of expensive perfume, a pound of it!, and pours it over Jesus' feet!

Now I wear expensive perfume. I mean, if I could afford the perfume of which I wear the eau de cologne, it would be expensive. Back when I was 13 years old, my Daddy gave me a bottle of Guerlain's L'heure Bleu – Blue Hour – and I've been wearing it ever since. The cologne, that is. the perfume is over \$200 an ounce and you can only find it at Neiman Marcus.

So when I hear this story, I imagine docile Mary trotting over to first century Palestine's equivalent of Neiman Marcus that afternoon before supper and purchasing, not an ounce, but a *pound – 16 liquid ounces* of L'heure Bleu just to pour all over Jesus' feet later.

When she does it, the house, of course, immediately fills with the scent of the rich perfume. In fact I'd be surprised if anybody can even breathe. Open-mouthed (probably gasping for air) the disciples gape as Mary then leans over and wipes away the dust and perfume from Jesus' feet *with her hair*.

When he can finally speak, the first words out of Judas' mouth are "What a waste!" And I gotta say I'm pretty tempted to stand with Judas on this one. I mean, do you have any idea how many pounds of Food Bank food could be purchased for the cost of 16 ounces of L'heure Bleu? Let's see – \$200 times 16 oz. Makes \$3200. A pound of food at the Food Bank costs, what, 16 cents a pound. Divide \$3,200 by 16 cents and that'd be 20,000 pounds of food for the poor that Mary could have bought with that perfume money! You gotta admit, this time fussy ole Judas has got himself a point, at least to any of us who try to manage a church budget and worry if we're giving enough of it to mission.

But you know Jesus – never mind he spends most of his time healing the sick and helping the poor - you still never know for sure where he's gonna come down. Moving target, that Jesus. Still, everybody's pretty surprised when the first words out of his mouth are "Leave her alone!" That's what Jesus says to Judas. "Leave Mary alone, Judas. You're always gonna have the poor with you, but you won't always have me."

As if to say - your budget, your mission work, your impulse to help – it's never going to be enough because, frankly, the need of the world is infinite. Only *I* can satisfy the need of the world, says Jesus, and you're flat not always going to have me with you.

You don't get that Judas, but Mary does – seems to be Jesus' underlying message. Mary of Bethany seems to know who's sitting before her, and what he's fixing to sacrifice for the salvation of all creation. Mary gets it, and when she does, she finds herself pouring herself out, behaving generously to a fault, somehow trying to match Jesus' extravagant sacrifice with an extraordinary gift of her own.

And in that giving, in that brief, bold, eccentric act, retiring Mary not only deepens her relationship with her savior, but also becomes more fully herself. In that singular act of offering herself wholeheartedly, her faith, her gifts, her love, perhaps her intuition of Jesus' impending death, Mary is redeemed from anonymity and partial personhood. No longer indistinguishable, blended with the crowd or confused with other women, Mary becomes one of Jesus' own, one who grasps who he is, and is fully grasped by him, a Called One. Through Jesus Christ, Mary learns to be herself, or, as Meister Eckhart puts it, she learns to live." (p.57)

And in that learning, and in that living, in that adventure of becoming herself in response to Jesus Christ, placid, innocuous, submissive Mary of Bethany quietly dynamites the world around her with the extravagance of her spontaneous and selfless love.

Now, maybe you don't relate to somebody like Mary of Bethany. Maybe you're more outgoing yourself, or more assertive, or more confident than she. But what if, in today's encounter with Jesus, you and I discovered how to offer ourselves, our faith, our love, our gifts, to the One who redeems *us* ultimately from anonymity, fear, restraint; the One who lead *us* to full personhood?

Or what if we substituted for Mary our whole community of faith here at Emory Church. What if in response to the extravagant love of God through Jesus Christ, this community discovered something about how to offer itself differently. What if, even as God is redeeming us from our self-absorption, anxiety and distrust to the mature body of Christ God intends us to be, we began to offer ourselves more fully, more freely, maybe even more impulsively ☺, to the world around us?

What if, even though we still felt a little tentative and tongue-tied, as Jesus draws closer to Calvary, we find ourselves acting out of a freedom and independence through which we keep learning more about ourselves, and acting freely out of that knowledge. Might we, too, as Meister Eckhart put it, increasingly learn to live?

And in that learning, and in that living, in that adventure of becoming ourselves in response to the extravagant love of God in Christ Jesus, might we not find ourselves doing something extravagant ourselves like, I don't know – pouring a pound of L'heure Bleu on the feet of the chaplains at Children's? Or throwing open our Fellowship Hall to the foster children and birth parents of Safe Haven? Or promptly supplying on about three days notice not six, not seven, but *eight* yummy cakes to the overstretched staff at a nearby neonatal intensive care unit?

We might. We've got plenty of precedence for that kind of extravagance in this church, like Jong preparing and cleaning up at every single Wednesday night supper, and Julianne planning and scheduling our whole Worship Readiness program, and Ann and Judy faithfully producing marvelous and festive monthly meals for the Tuesday Circle, Sue writing the liturgy and arranging the preachers for months on end, Yvonne and Tina knocking themselves out keeping the Youth program going ...the list goes on.

And through all of these extravagant acts of selfless love, I say God intends to amplify the potential of this pretty little church hidden behind the sacred magnolias quietly to dynamite the world around it.

We'll always have the poor with us, says Jesus – we can't change that. But we won't always have Jesus. In fact, here in just a few weeks we'll be standing at the foot of the cross we built to make him go away. Meanwhile, as you and I draw closer with

Jesus to Calvary, I wonder...what do you suppose God is quietly trying to dynamite out of you and me?

To the glory of God. Amen.