

SHATTERING THE CROSS – ANOINTING

John 12:1-8

As a child, though she enjoyed going to church, she always hated when the pastor came to visit because her mother would invite him to stay for dinner and she knew what that meant. Her home was a modest one, bordering on poor, a place where people enjoyed each other as family but a place as well where there was little to eat---one chicken for the whole family, and it was usually a small chicken at that. The smell of it frying filled the house and was a particular joy to the child but when the pastor came, the fragrance often soured. She knew what would happen. The whole family and the pastor would sit down to dinner and, of course he would be asked to offer the blessing. And it would always be a long prayer, made almost painful by the growling of her stomach. Then her mother would lift up the platter of fried chicken and offer it to the pastor who with much delight would take two pieces---the two best pieces---leaving less, much less for her. If the platter would be passed in a particular way, she would end up with only the neck. Oh why did he have to come and visit? Why didn't he just stay at church where he was supposed to be?

Jesus visited the home of Lazarus, recently brought out from the tomb. His sisters Mary and Martha set about welcoming him, though, as usual, it was Martha who was saddled with the work of welcome while Mary entertained the guest. The welcome was complicated, the stress of this visit was amplified by the presence of some of the disciples as well, these men who followed Jesus wherever he went. Every guest could expect to have his feet washed but Mary took this activity to a whole new level. Rather than merely using water, she broke open a jar of perfume and proceeded to pour it over the feet of Jesus and then to use her hair rather than a towel to dry them. An objection was raised by one of the disciples although his voice is suspect because it was rumored that as the keeper of funds, he would use money given for his own purposes. But Jesus allows the activity to proceed, declaring that what she has done will be remembered.

But what did Mary do? It seemed to at least one observer that her welcome was extravagant, far more than was needed, using valuable resources that might have been diverted to feeding the poor. Jesus indicates that her action would prepare him for activity that would soon occur, Judas and the others would always have opportunities to be generous and gracious.

On that day at Bethany, an anointing takes place. In the history of Israel, anointing was often reserved for kings. Oil would be poured over their heads to indicate that this Saul, this David had been chosen, even by God, to lead his

people. Authority and power were bound up in the oil, in the anointing. But this act could be seen in other moments as well. A Samaritan, upon encountering a man in a ditch who had been robbed and beaten, bathes the wounds with wine and oil to encourage healing. And here in Bethany, such anointing became an activity of hospitality, on this day, one that took on extraordinary meaning.

Though hospitality is prominent there in the home of Lazarus, the anointing has links to other similar experiences. In each and in all, anointing was the way by which the ordinary revealed an element of the holy and in this holy moment, there is power and authority and healing as well. Though God is always present, people suddenly recognize and remember and often rejoice.

Most of us are will not experience what Mary offers to Jesus. But we all can know of the anointing that comes at our baptism. No perfume but simply water. Not the feet but over the head. Baptism in the manner of anointing, welcomes and heals, gives strength and direction for living. It is an experience of the holy, it is the holy revealed in gestures that are ordinary. And it is in the ordinary where God is.

We can remember John proclaiming that his baptism was one of repentance but the baptism offered by Jesus would be one of the Holy Spirit and fire. In his own baptism, the spirit and voice of God remind him that he is beloved of God and it will be this identity that provides all that Jesus needs for him to live faithfully.

We gather around the Table today with bread and juice laid upon it. There will be prayer, maybe a too-long prayer as our souls anticipate the eating and drinking. We take up the bread and the cup and consecrate them, declaring that God is present in them, present to welcome, to feed, to send. Jesus cannot stay in the safety of the home of Lazarus where he will surely receive gracious hospitality. We cannot stay at the Table where grace is abundant. We must take this grace which reminds us of our baptism, our anointing and move out into the world, to anoint others, to console, to lift up, to empower. Then it is that we will begin to shatter the cross of crucifixion and witness to the cross of resurrection.

A favorite hymn of some simply asks:

Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee.

Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love,

Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautify for thee.