

Mary's Anointing - Deborah Huggins

God, be with us now, as we reflect on your word.

Thank you for engaging with me in this act of lectio divina. I hope this practice helped you to see this passage in a new way, and that you feel closer to God through it. By engaging in this practice, we can begin to see scripture as not only a source of study, but also as a source of prayer, and spiritual deepening.

This morning, I invite you all to reflect with me about prayer. In our service today, we have explored several types of prayer. Of course there are the corporate prayers that we are familiar with. These prayers form much of the backbone of our worship. This morning, we have also tried a breath prayer, and have practiced lectio divina with our Gospel reading. All throughout lent, Frank Yates, Phil Witherspoon, Debbie Stephen, Carol Dolan, and the rest of our worship team have invited us to consider other types of prayer- our bulletin covers, liturgical dance, bells, violin, choir, and other forms of music.

I also want to consider some of the other ways that we express our prayers. When we look around our sanctuary, we are struck by the banners- this one made by a confirmation class, and this one made by a former pastor, and this one made by our organist and clerk of session. Each of these banners is a reflection of a relationship between the people who made it and God. Then this relationship is manifested through their work, and shared with all of us who are worshiping. These beautiful windows- the first one made by members of the congregation for this space when it was built in the 1980's, and our beautiful recent windows, designed by Jennifer San Fillipo created by another team of volunteers from St. Andrew. Each of these people was called into this work- inspired by their own

relationship with God and with each other. Now their work inspires each one of us to a deeper relationship with the Divine. For me, just seeing the light stream through these windows, even on a Wednesday morning, makes me pause, and thank God. Here on the communion table this morning, Phil and Jean Witherspoon have gathered symbols of some of the ways that we pray. We have a pair of sandals, representing the prayer that we do when we are in God's creation. Many people feel closest to God in nature. Here we have the bible, and a hymnal, a journal, a prayer shawl, and a flower, representing the prayers we have in the garden. All of these objects represent some of the ways that we pray, and share our lives with God.

Returning to our prayer shawls. I would like to pause for a moment to reflect on this beautiful ministry, here at St. Andrew. When someone from our community is sick, or in need of prayer, our prayer shawl knitters make one of these prayer shawls. The shawls are based on a pattern of knit 3, purl 3. If you don't knit- knits are smooth, purls are bumpy. This simple pattern knit 3, purl 3, is a trinity- When Jackie Meese was telling me how to knit a shawl (which I have yet to finish) – She told me- knit 3, purl 3- Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. When Jackie knits one of these shawls, when Edith made this little blanket for Catherine Grace- they knit with the trinity- Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. For hours.

That was important to me when I took the baby blanket with me in the back of my mid-wife's car for our emergency c- section, or later, when I wrapped Catherine in it when she was a tiny baby struggling with RSV. Symbolically, I had our whole faith community with me. This last winter, when I pulled this little

blanket up under Catherine's chin when she sick again, I whispered, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and thought of Edith's prayers wrapping her up, and the prayers of our whole faith community- and all of them going up together with mine, to God.

These prayers were powerful. In my moments of worry and need, this little blanket reminds me of your deep faith and your prayers. When God feels far away, and I can't feel God's comfort, I can feel your comfort, and I am reminded that God has given me this community to help me with my journey. It restores my faith, and hope, and reassures me that God is with me. These outward expressions of prayer, and outward expressions of the love that we feel for God, are important reminders that we are living life, not on our own, but with a loving community, and with God.

In our Gospel reading today, we see another rich, and abundant example of prayer. Mary's action in this story, is to anoint Jesus' feet, with perfumed oil- nard. Incidentally, nard is rare, and precious essential oil that is extracted from the root of a flower that grows in the Himalayas. It has an earthy, deep smell, and in ancient days, it was used during childbirth, and to soothe the nerves. Our text says that Mary rubs this oil into Jesus' feet, then wipes it off with her hair, and "the whole house is filled with the scent."

This passage provides such a simple, and explicit image, that we can almost see ourselves in the room with Mary, Jesus, Lazarus and the others. We can witness Mary's act of devotion. First of all, Mary rubs this oil- oil that would cost her about a year's worth of wages, with her hands into the feet of Jesus. Those of us with excellent spouses, and friends, know how incredible it is to have our feet

massaged with oil. The act of doing the rubbing is also powerful (sometimes very powerful depending on the smell!). It is at once humbling, and an act of love and servant hood.

This act is already an extravagant prayer. When Mary wipes the oil off with her hair she goes even further to humble herself, and to demonstrate her discipleship. It seems natural that after oiling Jesus' feet, Mary could have used a towel to dry them, But perhaps a towel wouldn't have been enough for Mary. Perhaps a towel would have represented a barrier between herself, and her Jesus. Mary rejects that barrier. Instead she chooses to use her own hair. This is an act of service done out of respect and love. The intimacy of it shows the intimacy of their relationship.

Finally, John mentions the aroma of the nard, filling the whole house. Smells have a funny way of providing their own hospitality. Few of us can resist the aroma of bread, or cookies straight from the oven. In spite of ourselves, we are drawn to them. The use of the smell in this passage likewise draws us in to the intimacy between Mary and Jesus.

This is such an abundant act- such an intense prayer. We can't miss the depth of Mary's love for Jesus. We can't miss her devotion to him. And where does this love come from? It is in response to Jesus' love for Mary and for her family.

Mary's act anticipates Jesus' own foot washing lesson a week later. When Jesus washes the Disciple's feet, he explains to his disciples that as his followers, they must likewise wash each other's feet. Jesus' act as the servant, inspires them to do likewise. Jesus explains that this is the life of discipleship.

In this context, It is even more significant that Mary is shown here, anointing Jesus' feet. Mary is already participating in the life of the disciple, without being explicitly taught. She seems to act purely in response to the relationship. This hints at the depth of her understanding, and willingness to embrace the work of Christ. In fact, according to Leander Keck, Mary's act, here, is the quintessential revelation of faithful discipleship. And further, Keck points out, that this pure act of discipleship was first carried out by a woman.

If we continue to look at the larger context of this passage, we can see that it even hints at the end of John when Jesus instructs Peter to care for his people, out of Peter's own love for Jesus. Jesus asks Peter, "Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?" and Peter answers, "Yes Lord, You know that I love you." And Jesus says to him, "Tend my Sheep." Jesus is calling Peter to act as a servant to the people of the world out of Peter's devotion to Jesus. As followers of Christ, we are extended the same invitation. Out of our great love for Jesus, and Jesus's great love for us, we are to take care of his people with humility.

Mary's act- her prayer in action- was one of love, done in response to being loved by Jesus. This is, in fact, the life and relationship that we are all invited into through our faith in God through Christ Jesus.

This reading of Mary's act of love for Jesus, brings another person who lived in Jesus' love to mind- Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence's little book is called *Practicing the Presence of God*. Many of you are already familiar with the life of Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a Lay brother among the Carmelites in the 17th century. He was not an educated man, and prior to joining the Carmelites at the age of 24, he was a soldier, and a footman. Because Brother Lawrence

lacked the education to be a cleric, he was given a job in the kitchen at the monastery, and there he cooked and cleaned for all of the Brothers.

Brother Lawrence was not an intellectual, he didn't engage in any of the important debates of the day, but of all of the monks in his monastery, Brother Lawrence is the one that we remember best.

The reason why we remember Brother Lawrence is that he understood how to live his life in God's presence. Brother Lawrence, said that everything he did in his day, every pot he washed, every straw he picked up, was out of love for God. This desire to act out of love for God, brought him continually into God's presence. "Lord of all pots and pans and things.../ Make me a Saint by getting meals/ And washing up the plates!" And so Brother Lawrence, like Mary, is able to act out his love of God, through service.

Brother Lawrence invites us to cook and clean, as an act of love for God. He invites us to pick up a straw from the ground, for the love of God. He invites us to care for our children for the love of God. He invites us to create better websites, to teach, to do research, to answer the telephone, to volunteer, to work toward better healthcare- in short to do everything that we do every day out of love for God.

You may say- huh? How can every aspect of my life be a part of my relationship with God? Brother Lawrence tells us that God is always "nearer to us than we are aware of," that we have only to invite him in, in order to be in God's presence.

Just to let you know, this isn't that easy for me either. I find it challenging to remember that God is with me when I am trying to get dinner on the table after a long day, the house is a disaster (which happens so quickly I might add) the children are hungry, the baby is crying, and I feel stretched a little thin. I find it difficult to stop and remember, and to invite God into the moment.

Sometimes I find that I am able to- usually when I am able to stop for a minute, and catch my breath. A few weeks ago, we had a celebration at our home. Jeff's best friend from high school, Tin Nguyen, has moved to Albuquerque, and we had him over, as well as some of our family, and close friends. As we were eating- I looked up and saw everyone smiling, and my son, sitting next to "Uncle Tin." I caught Jeff's eye, and he smiled at me in a way, that said, "look at all that God has given us. We are so blessed." And for that hour, I felt God's blessings in our life, and I remembered God's closeness to us. It was as if the whole gathering became a kind of prayer.

Perhaps as I grow a little wiser, with time, I will be able to remember more often, and to thank God more often for God's presence in my life, and God's care for me. Perhaps, some day, I will be like Mary, or like Brother Lawrence, and I will live my life more fully in God's presence. Until then, I ask for God's help to bring me a little closer to God each day. Brother Lawrence himself said, "Lord, I cannot do this unless thou enablest me." And so we too can join in Brother Lawrence's prayer and some day, we may be able to live our lives continually in God's presence. Amen.

Invocation:

Be Still

And Know that I am God

This morning, we are going to do our invocation a little differently. An invocation is an invitation to God to come into our midst, to be part of our worship service. Today we are going to do that individually, asking god to come into us individually as well as corporately. We are going to practice a very simple breath prayer. The way that this works, is when you breathe in, you say to yourself, "Be still" and when you breathe out, you say, "and know that I am God." This is a very simple prayer that can be used throughout the day- I especially like it when I am walking, or doing something like washing dishes. If you would like to, I invite you to try it now, silently. (Pause). Now one more time together:

Be Still

And know that I am God.