

**March 21, 2010: YET ANOTHER SACRIFICE**  
**John 12:1-8, Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126**  
**Springwater Presbyterian Church -- Eileen Parfrey**

There's a stink in the air today. Maybe I'm just sensitive, because some of us have spent our Wednesday nights during Lent learning to pray with our senses—praying “sense-ably.” Just days before today's story, Mary and Martha were interrupted at the post-funeral reception for their brother Lazarus to learn that Jesus wanted to see them. Nice timing, Jesus. Had you come a mere four days earlier, we wouldn't be having this party. *Now* he wants to pay his respects and have the tomb opened. Martha chides Jesus in King James English, “Lord, he stinketh.” Despite the miracle of raising Lazarus and its celebration, there's still a grave stench in the room, and it's coming from Jesus. It seems that a plot has been hatched by the Temple heavies to execute him in order to save the nation, and it's a death Jesus either cannot or will not avert. The road now runs straight to Jerusalem, sickening everyone with the stench of impending death. Into that sticky bouquet, Mary introduces the sweetness of nard. Maybe she is using the last of the anointing perfumes bought for her brother Lazarus' funeral. With an odor between ginseng and chamomile, it's a welcome relief to everyone. Except Judas. Judas doesn't smell nard, he smells money, with overtones of sanctimony and a tinge of coinage.

What disturbs me is Isaiah's prophecy: “Do not remember the former things . . . I am about to do a new thing.” Left simply in its own context, Isaiah's words prefigure any contemporary self-help book urging us to live by the adage, “It's not your fault, get over it. Put the past behind you, take these seven simple steps, your life will change.” Put those words next to Judas. Judas carries an aroma of former things, but they are *good* former things. He is the personification of “decently and in order”—frugal, cautious, practical, wise in the ways of positive cash flow. He sticks to the policies and procedures manual. Whereas, there is a whiff of New Thing to Mary's act, taking place as it does, six days before Passover. You remember 6 days. God created the world in six days and on the 7<sup>th</sup> rested. On *this* sixth day, Jesus will hang on the cross as the culmination of New Creating. After *this* Sabbath, the Eighth Day dawns as resurrection. Wake up and smell the coffee, it's the smell of success. Death is defeated.

But for now, it's the smell of death in everyone's nostrils. They can see it on Jesus' face as he sits at dinner. Maybe the conversation was of the day's news, of plans for the up-coming Passover sacrifice in Jerusalem, of the theological implications of someone dead brought to life—but there was a definite pall over the talk. It was supposed to be a festive time, what with Lazarus himself sitting there! Does this make Mary's act any more sensible, reasonable? She anoints Jesus on his *feet*. She's not proclaiming victory—she would have anointed his head for that and they would have proclaimed him king. Instead, she pours a small fortune on his feet, what you do for dead people. It's grief expressed before-hand, enacted prophecy, love that knows it only has *right now*—and so it must act. If Mary was thinking of Isaiah, perhaps she was forgetting *her* former things—the need to be right or doing the correct thing or proving her point. More likely, she was aware that there was only *this* moment with the freedom to act.

Into this sacred moment of *right now*, Judas inserts correct teaching. This is what the master has passed on, what the tradition has taught. This is what good, solid Judaism offers as counter-witness to the world: take care of the poor, because compassion toward others is worship of God. It's an ironic contrast. Judas' name means “God's name be praised,” while the root of both Mary and Martha's names is “bitter.” Yet “God's name be praised” is imprisoned by play-it-by-the-book discipleship, while the Bitter Sister makes the shocking, vivid, sensuous gesture of discipleship that prefigures Jesus' own act of self-emptying love.

Preacher Fred Craddock maintains that most theological debate is really about “what kind of God you have.” Judas' God makes sense, adds up, so let's just return the conversation to theology and religion. If we play our cards right and get enough votes, we can pass this new Messiah measure in the Temple. By her

wasteful, scandalous, out-of-control demonstration, we learn that Miss Bitter's God is simply about love—love that connects and empowers. No wonder Judas has such disdain for her kind of discipleship.

Does it stink for you like a 3-day-old fish, this “Let's not go off the deep end” discipleship? Do you honestly catch the fragrance of roses around Mary's throw-everything-out-with-the-bathwater discipleship? Judas speaks for many Presbyterians. He is a pragmatic, frugal disciple. He's a good steward. He balances demands on his resources, he's a good time manager, he sets goals and meets them. Mary's the scandalous one. She apparently did not get Isaiah's memo, the one that says “Do not remember.” In remembrance of her brother's raising, the bitterness of her name is set aside to pour herself out in love.

I don't think Isaiah's “Do not remember the former things” means “forget this ever happened.” More likely, I think this is God's way of saying, “Don't limit me to just one way of redemption.” Judas represents sticking with the old plan. The question for us is, “What's worth pouring your life out for?” If Fred Craddock is right, *what* you pour you life out for reflects who you think God is. The movie, *Babette's Feast*, tells a similar tale. Babette finds herself in an isolated community of dour, pious religious folks. She's working as a domestic for their elderly leader and his sisters. They are unaware of Babette's past life in Paris, so when she receives a fortune and decides to produce one, gorgeous, extravagant meal for the whole sect, they become suspicious. Preparations build expectation in the guests, and these simple folk with their constricted world view are baffled by Babette's exotic ingredients. She procures wine—and it's not for the Eucharist. As the stoically rigid group sits at table, inundated with the extravagance of Babette's gift, they do not know how to react. The preparations had made them afraid of losing her, but the sheer profligacy of this meal guarantees she will now never be able to leave them. She has wasted her entire living on this one evening for them.

Mary's gesture, precisely. We usually think it is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that effectuates our redemption—his death for our lives. Redemption means we get another chance, this time on God's terms. Another way of understanding what makes that happen is offered by Mary's extravagant gesture. Redemption is not about God locking us in with divine control, it's about our connectedness to God.<sup>1</sup> That connectedness is the basis of all power, all of what gives us life. That Judas could not understand and accept Jesus' life-giving connectedness was to his own destruction. “Do not remember the former things.” That Mary “got it” meant her own self-emptying. She became a prophetic pre-figure of Christ's self-emptying. There is nothing “economical” about Jesus' death. His death is nothing more than the extravagance of God's love made flesh. That extravagance means we must hear the rest of Mary's message: that there is enough of that love to go around, with plenty left over. What are you going to do about it?

[Return to Sermons Page](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart*, p. 39.