



**CONTEMPLATING AN IMAGE OF THE ANOINTING WOMAN
“WHAT WONDROUS LOVE IS THIS”**

In “The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed” the authors reflect upon a central question that emerges as praying people encounter the Passion of Jesus, the man of sorrows. The prayer of the passion “raises questions about who and where God is and how humans and God are in relationship: “What in my world is suffering? How am I to be compassionate?” Let us hold these questions in our hearts as we join Jesus, the man of sorrows as he journeys toward

his death during this Lenten time only to give us back the gift of Easter life and a joy beyond imagining. When we cross the threshold into Holy Week, we will be asked to accompany Jesus in the most intimate moments of his life. WE contemplate Him as we accept as well whatever inner journey of healing or homecoming, we, or those whom we love might need as they walk their own way of the cross.

Today we are invited in our Holy Week journey into the company of a woman who appears in three of the four Gospel narratives and hence begs to be remembered. She begs us also to pray this morning by remembering and pondering Jesus' relationship with women, with us. In Matthew's account as well as in Mark's this woman is nameless, she appears unannounced at the Bethany dinner party as the drama and terror of Jesus' passion mounts. Her attention, her energy, her affection is focused solely on Jesus. She is a woman of action, a woman who crosses gender boundaries in recognition of a most sensitive and tragic moment in the life of Jesus. He who has been healer

**of so many receives from her what at this moment he may
be no longer able to give.**

This event is the prelude to the Passion narrative. Amid the crowd of disciples, elders, and Jewish leaders she emerges to disturb the meal taking rituals in the home of Simon who had been a healed leper. Her action and her movement parallel the coming action of her sisters who will enter the space at the foot of the cross to remain as faithful witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. She comes wordlessly to perform extravagant gestures that speak more loudly than words. She bathes his head with a precious and wildly expensive ointment. As the ointment drips down Jesus' body feels the first loving preparation for burial and he recognizes anew his royal commissioning. She is a healer and prophet in her rich wordless courageous gestures and Jesus recognizes her gift immediately.

The beauty of her deed resides in its timeliness. As is often the case with interlopers, her gestures and actions create strong reactions on the part of the witnesses.

Lavishness often provokes indignation and confusion. Her gesture does not register with those who witness her actions. She alone recognizes that this is Jesus' moment whereas the disciples do not. Yet all she needs to know is that Jesus understands. She knew he was the one most in need of compassion no matter what the cost to her person or her reputation might be.

The extraordinary words that end this scene are some of the most memorable and consoling we might ever imagine from the lips of Jesus: "Truly I tell you: wherever this gospel is proclaimed throughout the world, what she has done will be told as her memorial." The action of this woman, her courageous crossing of boundaries to minister as disciple and friend to Jesus as he faces death, is a mirror image of the action of Jesus both in life and death. The breaking of bread and the pouring of wine "in memory of him" is paralleled by the breaking of boundaries and the pouring out of ointment "in memory of her." A woman's actions at a supper and Jesus' own action at a supper are to be remembered as constitutive elements of the gospel story.

In our prayer this morning we remember her lavish gestures toward Jesus and times when we have given or received such lavish gestures ourselves. I volunteered at a woman's shelter in Worcester called Abby's House for many years. One evening the police brought us a deinstitutionalized woman who was wandering the streets at night and needed safety. She was unkempt, obese, and unable to perform the required task of a bath or shower that we required of our arriving guests. I was the team coordinator that evening and so the task fell to me at midnight to get the woman into the tub and give her a bath. It was late and she was initially uncooperative but more afraid of the street than the tub. As I reluctantly eased her into the tub and began to wash her something in me was touched and changed and suddenly, I realized that I was washing the body of Christ. How often have those moments become real in our recent journeys?

All of us here this morning are compassionate healers or in need of compassionate healing in one way or

another in our lives. We are nurses, administrators, engaged in pastoral care, stewards of the resources of our aging communities, social workers, teachers, ministers to one another, volunteers varied settings. ...REMEMBER A MOMENT WHEN YOU HAVE BEEN ANOINTED OR WHEN YOU ANOINTE ANOINTNED ANOTHER. WHAT GIFTS OF COMPASSION WERE STIRRED UP IN YOU AT THAT MOMENT? How do you want to draw upon such compassion simply to be with Jesus in this season when our companionship is of the utmost importance to him? How do you want to draw upon such compassion to see anew the passions and the way of the cross of our world in Ukraine, Gaza, on college campuses, in our inner cities through his eyes, through his sufferings, through his promise of resurrection?

A poet and artist who writes about this woman says:

Did she disappear as quickly as she came?

Scripture carries no certain trace.

Only her memory is telling.

**At a crossroad,
“a woman” risked a leap of faith
that was not really blind
because she believed the Messiah was there.
Ministry to him caused her to be
a broken alabaster jar.
Her tear, the cost of caring,
is perfume stored in the flask of God.**

**“What she has done”
invites us all
to reflect on the cross in the eyes of another,
to discern the peculiar moments
when the pull and pain
of particular persons
are nearer or clearer
than the Poor-far away from us-.**

**What is told for all time
is that Presence to Another**

defines the heart of ministry, whatever its name.