

“Inside Devotion”

March 13, 2016

From the Inside Out series – 5th Sunday in Lent

It started as a celebration. I can imagine people gathered at the table talking about Jesus, excited that he was there. Martha had dinner ready to go and probably worried about the details. Lazarus was still the topic of conversation – the man who was dead and was alive again. People were probably staring at him and wondering what to say to him. Mary was there near Jesus – deeply grateful to be with her family and with Jesus.

I’ll admit that I’d be a little confused by Mary’s offering – to take a container of pricey oil and pour it out on someone’s feet seems like a waste. And why? It’s not what you’re supposed to do, but then, Mary hadn’t done what she was supposed to do. She would rather sit at Jesus’ feet than do anything else. Jesus isn’t just anyone.

It’s easy to see why Judas is so upset, especially when the Gospel writer tells us that it’s more about Judas’ own desire than his concern for the poor. And it’s easy to understand why Mary is so grateful. Jesus has been with her in the incredible grief of death and the incredible joy of Lazarus being alive again!

Mary’s devotion grows out of a relationship with Jesus. They’ve been through a lot together. In Luke’s Gospel, it’s Mary who has a desire to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from him. Her sister, Martha, is less than impressed, but Jesus recognizes Mary’s will to listen learn as something positive.

For a woman to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn as a man would was not typical. Some probably thought it was inappropriate! We might even call Mary one of the first women recognized as a disciple because of her faith and trust in Jesus – and her attentiveness to him. Jesus says she’s doing the right thing to sit at his feet and learn.

It’s in the Gospel of John where Lazarus’ death is recorded. And when he dies, Mary tells Jesus that he should’ve been there. Both she and Martha had great faith in Jesus and in his power to heal Lazarus before he died. It’s her tears along with the tears of those who surround her that cause Jesus to weep. Jesus raises Lazarus from death to life, and many believe in him because of it. We can imagine how grateful Mary is for what Jesus has done.

So her act of love – pouring expensive oil on Jesus’ feet and taking down her hair to wipe it off – comes out of deep gratitude. But we know it’s not typical! Just as she shows what it means to follow Jesus – to learn from him – to her family, now she’s an example of what a disciple is to those around Jesus – even to those who were his closest followers! Jesus’ comment about the poor always being with us doesn’t suggest that

their needs are not important. Rather, he makes it clear that Mary responds to who he is – the Savior of the world – while he is still with them.

Mary and Judas stand in stark contrast to each other – one is faithful and ready to give all she has, and the other is greedy and will turn against Jesus. Mary shows us what it means to live as a disciple – to give our best gifts to God because what we receive is even greater and more extravagant than what we could ever give back. This encounter challenges us to ask ourselves where we fit.

Mary is thankful for the gift of life given to her brother. But there's more to it. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and even he recognizes that Mary's act has something to do with what's ahead. This anointing was something that might be done at a king's coronation or for a priest – a sign of divine service, but anointing with oil like Mary's was also to prepare a body for burial. An act like this carries more meaning than just an act of thanksgiving. It offers a look at what's coming, and what's coming is Jesus' death.

Bethany is on the way to Jerusalem, and there are people looking for Jesus. Certainly they've heard about Lazarus – word travels fast! Some want to know more about him because of what he did for Lazarus and some who are becoming concerned of his growing popularity among the people because of what he did for Lazarus.

Mary's act of generosity is a prelude to what Jesus will do when he gathers with the disciples in the Upper Room. He will show them how to serve. He will show them to give for the benefit of others, to show them love, and to draw them into a new life with God. Somehow Mary has a sense of just how extravagant and over-the-top God's love is because she uses all of the oil to show her faith and hope in what Jesus will do.

How far would you go to show your love for Jesus? How far do you go to give thanks for his love for you? As we come to Holy Week, as we're making our way to Jerusalem with Jesus, we face those questions. What does real devotion look like? How do we show it?

Mary is a powerful example for us. Her intent isn't to draw attention to herself, although that happens. Her intent really is to worship Jesus – to honor him in a way that shows her devotion. For us, devotion might mean something we read every day, but devotion is about where we place our love, loyalty, and enthusiasm.

So, here's the tough question. If you asked someone else to tell you what they thought you were devoted to, what would they say? You and I are not Mary, but the challenge is that it was clear to whom she was devoted. It was clear to all the people in the dining room that night whom she loved. It was clear to all the people in that room to whom she was loyal. She loved Jesus and was devoted to him.

As I talked with others, a couple of things became clear in terms of how we live our faith. It sounds simple, but was profound as I thought more about it. The first thing

is that *we talk a lot about how much Jesus loves us*. What's the first song we learn in the church? *Jesus loves me, this I know...*

Now there's nothing wrong with that. It's important to hear those words and to claim that truth for ourselves. But sometimes that's where we stay. *We talk a lot about how much Jesus loves us, but we don't talk about how much we love Jesus!*

We have trouble communicating our love for Jesus. Maybe we think it's self-serving or self-righteous to talk about how much we love Jesus, but I'm challenged by what Mary does. She wants everyone to know her feelings about Jesus, and she's bold enough and brave enough to go against every cultural expectation to show her love for him and truly worship him! She goes out of her way and risks her reputation for him. This act of love costs her something – not just monetarily, but even socially.

We have to be honest that we can't ever love Jesus as much as he loves us, but we can do more to show our devotion to him. We can be more intentional about spending time in prayer. We can be more committed to worship – not with the mindset that we're here to be fed, but rather with a clearer focus on offering ourselves in worship to God. We can be more aware of our God's call on our lives in finances, relationships, and friendships. How does our love for Jesus show beyond this time of worship?

It's fairly normal practice to be thankful for the gifts we've been given. We might write a thank-you note, send a message, or acknowledge it face-to-face, but when it comes to telling Jesus, I'm not sure we do such a great job. We celebrate God's love for us, but we don't always say thank you or share the joy of our faith in Jesus. We keep it to ourselves.

We've said all along that Lent is an inward journey, but the journey we take with Christ should reflect in our outward actions. What is it costing you and me to follow Jesus? The truth is that it should cost us something.

Have you given up a habit or taken something on that brings you closer to God? Have you spent more time in prayer or in Bible study? Have you committed to serving God more faithfully? Have you given more money than usual as an act of faith and sacrifice? Have you reconciled with someone? Have you given time to a ministry that serves God? In what you've offered, consider how God has transformed you.

That's what I wonder. How was Mary different after this act of love that she offered to Jesus? How was she transformed? Surely some people were amazed – and some maybe disgusted by what she did. But how was she changed because of her worship?

God receives our worship and changes us, but God also uses us as a witness. May God take our love and devotion and use it to share Good News with others.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.