

Sermon Preached on  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
(March 13, 2016)  
"Passion"

When you hear the word "passion," what do you think of? Usually, it's intense emotion, deep caring, strong feeling. But, you could also hear it and think of Jesus' crucifixion.

You know, the Passion of Christ.

In today's Gospel, we have both meanings. If this story seems familiar to you - a woman anoints Jesus while he's at a meal with disciples, that's because it's in every single Gospel. True, Luke's gospel does something completely different with it and makes it almost a different story altogether, but the fact that all four gospels have a woman come in and anoint Jesus means that this is important. And shocking (as it is said to be in every gospel).

Moreover, Mark and Matthew are pretty close to John's version. But, there are a couple of big differences.

First, in John, this woman has a name. Mary. She's the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Lazarus was raised from the dead just one chapter earlier. [I have my suspicions that the order has been changed by John, but that's neither here nor there]. Mary and Martha only appear in one other Gospel - Luke - and it is in Luke where Martha frantically serves the tables while Mary sits at Jesus's feet with the disciples and listens to his teaching. She defies convention in Luke, and she does it John, too, for while Martha serves table here, Mary leaves behind the serving to something even more radical than sit at Jesus' feet.

And this brings us to the second big difference. Mary anoints Jesus' feet. In Mark and Matthew, it is an unnamed woman who comes into the house and anoints Jesus' head.

In all three cases, Jesus says that what she has done is anoint him for his burial. Mary not only anoints his feet, but dries them with her hair. Why would she do such a thing? As Mark and Matthew make clear, anointing his head would have given the same message.

Well, here we can take a peek at Luke's very different version. Luke tells us that the nameless woman is a known "sinner". She washes Jesus's feet with her tears and dries them with her hair because her sin has been forgiven. Because her great sin has been forgiven, so her love for Jesus is great. Big forgiveness equals big love.

But in John's version, Mary anointing Jesus' feet and drying them with her hair has nothing to do with her own sinfulness. Rather, it has to do with her passion. Here, Mary knows Jesus. She, Martha and Lazarus are all beloved friends. In John's Gospel, Jesus has not warned the disciples repeatedly that he would die. Rather, he tends to say, "My time is not yet" or "My time has not yet come." NOW, with Mary, his time has come, and she is the one who not only announces it to the disciples but feels it in her soul.

For Mary - the one Jesus asked for when he came to Lazarus's grave - She knows what is to happen. She is performing a prophetic action, and it is breaking her heart. Her actions are deeply felt, deeply caring - passionate - as she foretells of the Passion of Christ.

Let's pay attention to this point. She is the first to not only see but acknowledge - as much pain as it brings - that Jesus must and will sacrifice himself. She may not grasp the full importance of that act - that Jesus' death will lead to resurrection. But then, her brother had just been raised from the dead by Jesus, so who knows? Regardless, she knew dark times were just around the corner.

How important is this act? With Passover just around the corner, Jesus' death is nearly upon us. In the very next Chapter, Jesus will share the last supper and - in a mirror image of Mary's shocking anointing - he will wash the feet of his disciples. Then he will tell them to do likewise.

This act is so important that it is modeled by us to this very day. (though admittedly, I'm not going to dry anybody's feet with my hair).

John's Gospel deals differently with this story than the others in that he gives the woman a name. And he intensifies her passion.