

The Liberating Love of Jesus

Mark 14:1-9

Everyone wants to be loved, it would seem. Even the most unlovable person we know—perhaps, the most caustic, toxic, obnoxious, unappealing, diabolic, curmudgeon—desires a little tenderness and mercy, a little compassion and kindness, perhaps even a little understanding and acceptance from someone else. No normally-functioning person wants to be completely shunned or shamed, isolated or disregarded, even when it appears they deserve it. Positive social encounters are that integral to human health and wellbeing.

This may explain why shunning has been an age-old form of religious correction, or why solitary confinement is often considered the most psychologically damaging form of torture. That might surprise some, but as stated in an article published for the International Red Cross,

Being confined for prolonged periods of time alone in a cell has been said to be the most difficult torment of all to withstand – a comment made, moreover, by hardened prisoners used to rigorous conditions and abuse. ¹

Imposed isolation degrades a person’s sanity and wellbeing, which is why it serves as a punishment to break the spirit of prisoners and detainees. When anyone is robbed of human contact for an extended time, they begin to self-destruct with

...sleep disturbances, anxiety, panic, rage, loss of control, paranoia, hallucinations, self-mutilations ... cognitive dysfunction, ... depression [and] emotional breakdown. ²

¹ Hernán Reyes, “The Worst Scars are in the Mind: Psychological Torture,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 89 Number 867 September 2007, pg. 607.

Those are the observations of trauma specialists. We humans are wired to be social, so to deny contact is considered extreme torture.

But humans aren't just social creatures; we're wired to love as well. Several studies have shown that certain parts of the brain "light up" when, let's say, adults view the faces of infants and little children—not just adults who have children, but those without, as well.³ The brain's chemistry itself responds to love in the form of nurturing or romance through the release of endorphins, oxytocin, dopamine, and other hormones and neurotransmitters. Researchers believe that as the human brain has evolved, behaviors important for survival and the maintenance of relationships, such as protection, nurturing, and caring, have become intrinsic and universal to the human population. In other words, common expressions of love are basic to our nature, whether or not we have opportunity to show it. The corollary is, to not be social, and to not express love (especially to those who are related to or closest to us) puts us in conflict with our most primal nature.

So then, what prevents us from loving others? Maybe it's easier to ask, what doesn't get in the way? Love, in its purest form, is like clear water—it's transparent, appealing, refreshing, and integrates perfectly with our body and soul. We sense pure love as children in our innocence; as adults, we might get a sense of it when we initially fall in love, or when a child inspires the beauty of it in us. It's when we feel that everything is right in the relationship—it couldn't be

² Ibid., quoting Craig Haney, "Mental health issues in long-term solitary and "supermax" confinement", *Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Jan. 2003, pp. 124–56. Professor Haney is a recognized expert on the effects of solitary confinement.

³ Jeanna Bryner, "Baby Love May Be Hard-Wired in Human Brain," *LiveScience.com*, March 16, 2012.

better. However, rarely is that innocent beauty retained over time. That clear, clean “water” gets tainted by all sorts of relational junk and psychological garbage thrown into it (disappointments, misunderstandings, miscommunication, mistrust, grief, anger, rejection, resentments, and various scars from trauma); love, then, gets polluted with problems and pain and, at times, becomes increasingly toxic. Granted, this is a slightly oversimplified way of looking at it, but it serves the point. Our ability to love and to receive love is impacted by all the things that bruise and damage us as persons. The natural innocence and pure love within us gets polluted by the painful, isolating, traumatizing toxins in life.

If you feel this way about your own life and relationships, let me assure you, you’re not alone. Every one of us struggle with not being able to love more fully, consistently, or purely. Sometimes it’s because we’re being toxic; other times it’s because someone else is. Everyone has their ups and downs with life and love—with marriages, partnerships, friendships, family, and the like. We’ve likely had some beautiful relationships that are cherished and enjoyed, offset by those that annoy or torment us. It’s called, being human. The purity of our love is constantly tainted by “stuff.”

This came to mind the other day when I began exploring this story in Mark of the woman who anointed the head of Jesus in the final days of his life. It’s a familiar tale, but perhaps not as familiar to us as it was meant to be. I’ll explain that in a moment.

This story itself comes to us as an episode toward the end of Jesus’ life which occurred in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper. That brief description immediately tells us two things: a) located in

Bethany, it wasn't a particularly classy place to be, and b), to have dinner with a leper suggests hygiene wasn't the first order of the day. The setting alone would have raised eyebrows among those who first heard this tale. On the surface, it's not the sort of anecdote that people would find particularly appealing, unless it was to poke fun or say something derogatory about it. Except, it stands out as being an encounter which Jesus himself claimed would be remembered whenever the Gospel would be shared from that time forward, with Jesus saying, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what [this woman] has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Let's put that to the test: how many have heard this story before? You may have heard John's version of it, identifying the woman as Mary, who washed Jesus' feet with her hair—a passage perhaps more familiar to us. But, in many respects, these are not the same stories (in spite of John's reworking of it), nor are they the same women. Either way, neither story would be more popular or memorable than many other passages, such as the birth narratives, or the Good Samaritan, or the Sermon on the Mount, or the Feeding of the Multitude, or John 3:16, or just about any other passage in the New Testament. It seems strange to think this episode about a woman who anointed Jesus' head with expensive oil was supposed to be more memorable.

What's so memorable about it? That the woman possessed expensive perfume in an alabaster jar—a rare and expensive commodity imported from India? Or was it Jesus' observation that there will always be poor people (which is rather disheartening for

those trying to end poverty)? Or was it supposed to be memorable because she, alone, seemed to know Jesus was going to die and was preparing his body for death? All of that could make a point, to be sure, but *an everlasting point*? Is any of this more memorable than anything else related to the Gospel?

So what might it be? Let's pause for a moment and try to connect the dots. One thing to notice is that it was a woman, who by custom wouldn't have been invited to this dinner at Simon's house, since females as a rule weren't allowed to eat at a table with men. Secondly, since she is unnamed and not identified in relation to anyone else, this means she lacked even a status within this household; she must have been an outsider. This makes even more notable the chutzpah she had to intrude and boldly go to the head of the table where Jesus, as the honored guest, was lying and proceeded to anoint him with oil. What compelled her to break the rules of social custom and etiquette, to be so forward to risk being socially shamed, even among this rather lowly company?

Whatever it was that compelled this woman to be so forward, and socially awkward, was further magnified by the fact she brought this expensive perfume. It was worth 300 denarii, which was equivalent to the entire *annual* income of the average laborer in those times! In other words, this wasn't the widow's mite, though in effect, it could well have been, insofar it's hard to imagine anyone in Bethany possessing an item worth that much! Everything of value in this woman's life could have been contained in the beautiful alabaster jar! That's how ridiculous this scene was to those who first heard about it.

That's why their complaint was made that she could have sold the oil and fed everyone in the village for days!

So what made her do this? What did Jesus do for her to provoke this kind of over-the-top, outlandish response? We don't know, of course, but it's very possible that he gave her something of greater value to her than any material object or possession.

What might that be? Perhaps, he gave her back her life! Was she like the woman accused of adultery whom he saved from a death by stoning? Or had she felt stigma and ostracizing shame like the Samaritan woman at the well? Or maybe she was sick and ritually unclean for a long time like the hemorrhaging woman, whom Jesus healed and made whole. Or she could have been any of the deeply wounded and scarred people whom Jesus helped—people who were unable to love or to feel loved.

If so, he liberated this woman from all that kept her from experiencing love—all the toxic garbage of her life in a world that devalued her gender. That's why she was anonymous; she wasn't just an unknown woman, she was *Every Woman*. And Jesus embraced them, healed them, showed mercy to them, and included them as equals in this redemptive community he was forming. There was no greater treasure in this life!

What made this story so memorable? This woman did what so many others refused to do, or didn't feel the need to do. She loved Jesus in return. She treated him like she would her most perfect lover, her most beloved child, or her dearest friend. She loved him in the beauty and innocence of pure love, without complication or second thoughts or selfishness. That's what compelled her to behave

as she did. Only the most precious possession was fitting for what he had done for her.

Everyone else was trying to get their piece of Jesus, everyone wanted him to love and take care of them, but this anonymous woman in the beautiful act of pouring oil over Jesus' head and massaging its perfume into his hair and scalp, expressed deep love and tenderness, compassion and kindness, understanding and acceptance at a time when Jesus would have been carrying the load of the world upon his shoulders, and soon enough, his own cross. It must have touched him so deeply that he could be loved and cared for by a gentle, loving hand when he needed it most. In that act, she completed the circuit that love is intended to generate: love that is shared in perfect trust and reciprocity between two people. She completed the circle of love, given and received. This is what made it so memorable.

The poet, Wendell Berry once wrote,

Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field, "the least of these my brethren." Love is not, by its own desire, heroic. It is heroic only when compelled to be. It exists by its willingness to be anonymous, humble, and unrewarded.⁴

It existed in this anonymous woman of ancient Judea, whose story continues to be told to this day. For she illustrated in her example, what love is meant to be and how it saves us all as a redemptive, reciprocal, and liberating force in life. That is something for us all to remember.

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⁴ M. Scott Peck (ed.), *Abounding Grace: An Anthology of Wisdom*, Ariel Books, 2000, pg. 299.