

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 22, 2010

I think Hannah Salwen may be an angel. I recently heard about her and the amazing sacrifice she encouraged her family to make a few years ago. At the age of 14, she was inspired by something we have all seen... a homeless person on a street corner. Stopped at a traffic light with her father in downtown Atlanta, she also noticed a man driving a Mercedes... and was touched by the contrast. So touched that she wanted to do something... so she persuaded her family to sell their spacious home in Ansley Park and give away the proceeds. The Salwen family lives in a much smaller house now and they have scaled back their lifestyle considerably. What could have been only a random thought at a stop light is now a story of incredible generosity and it is all because a young teen cared enough to push her parents to make a difference.

Hannah's story reminds me of Mary... using the precious nard to wash Jesus' feet. This perfumed oil was extremely valuable, and as I recently learned, equal to a family's income for an entire year.

Mary and Hannah both felt a call to sacrifice something valuable for a higher purpose. For Mary, I think it was to show her devotion and faith in Jesus. For Hannah, it was to try to correct what she saw as an injustice in the world. Both stories are inspiring and both have me thinking about my own willingness to make a sacrifice for the greater good. And that is the beauty of Lent, it gives us a time each year to reflect and examine our priorities in life. I haven't made a decision about my own sacrifice for this year, but having read these stories, I realize I want to be more thoughtful in my approach.

The Power of Half by Hannah Salwen and her father, Kevin Salwen, has just been published. I plan to read it as part of my preparation for Lent this year.

I know I am not Hannah or Mary, but I hope to find my own humble approach using them as my inspiration. At the very least, they have made me think.

Jayne Gocken

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 23, 2010

Jesus is under threat of the death penalty, there's a warrant for his arrest, and his friends throw a party. I imagine that we are watching a play unfold.

ACT III, SCENE 1: *(The dining room of a house in Bethany. Jesus, the recently-resurrected Lazarus, Judas and other disciples recline before a table. Martha is back in the kitchen preparing the food. Enter Mary.)*

A happy scene, a breather following the drama of Act II; the calm before the upcoming storm when Jesus enters Jerusalem, we might think—until Mary pours \$15,000 worth of perfume on Jesus' feet.

Judas gasps. He grabs out, but the money splashes onto the floor and trickles away. All that remains is the fragrance. He lashes out at Mary with a howl about the poor. To which Jesus answers that Haiti will always be in need, as will Bangladesh and the starving children in Armenia but his friends won't have him with them always. Mary, he says, is preparing his body for burial and will be immortalized for her adoration.

And what seemed like the little relief scene in the drama, takes on great weight. We are left to figure it out.

We? Me. So, I Googled, of course. And of the many layers of meaning in this passage, the foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection, the juxtapositions and parallels, even the mind readings of some, I kept thinking about what Mary knew and intended.

Mary adored Jesus, even before he raised Lazarus from the dead. Now she must be overcome with joy and gratitude. To show her love she spills perfume over his feet and wipes them with her hair. What she does is not only extravagant beyond all reason, but she defies custom. She literally lets her hair down, something women don't do before men other than their husbands. "I don't know how to love him," sang Mary Magdalene in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The song could be this Mary's as well. She loves Jesus with all she has and is.

Perhaps she anticipates Jesus' death, assuming she knows about the arrest warrant. But does she know his death is imminent? That she should prepare for his burial? I can't know.

Jesus, though, can mold her devotion to his needs. He can take one sincere act and expand it beyond measure. Martin Luther hammered 95 theses to the door of the church in Worms. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. Mary poured out perfume and Martha served supper.

Neither their acts nor mine have to be appropriate, politically correct, or theologically sound for Jesus to accept them and use them for his purpose.

As for the poor, Jesus isn't letting us off the hook. We have a responsibility and his example. Somebody else, though, can explain his words in this passage.

Jennie Helderman

March 24, 2010

This passage in John takes place after Jesus' enemies in Jerusalem have plotted to kill him. Jesus had already raised Lazarus when he returned to Bethany to visit once more with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Martha served the meal, and Lazarus sat at table with Jesus. Mary must have sensed that time with Jesus was limited and found her heart overflowing. To convey the depth of her feelings, she takes a bottle of nard (very expensive perfume) she had been saving to use to prepare Jesus' body for burial. She knew the time to use the perfume was now while Jesus was with her, rather than saving it until he was gone. Kneeling before him, she anoints his feet, then wipes them with her long hair and wafts the perfume throughout the house. Judas is disappointed in Mary. He does not understand why Mary did not sell the perfume in exchange for money that could be given to the poor. Judas, who kept the common purse and stole money from it often, probably wanted the money for himself. Jesus, realizing the depth of Mary's feelings, defends her.

As I studied this passage, Mary's demonstration of her unconditional love and devotion for Jesus stood out as important to me. Mary was very thankful to Jesus for raising her brother from the dead. Mary also wanted to do something to show Jesus just how much she loved him by using her very special perfume to anoint his feet.

The extraordinary love Mary feels for Jesus reminds me of the unconditional love a parent has for her child. Parents are constantly giving all that they have for their children in order to keep them safe, happy, and provided for in the best way they are able. Like a parent tries to give the best they can for their children, Mary did not hesitate to use the very best perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. Mary loves Jesus and shows him how much by her actions.

Children also exhibit the unconditional love Mary shows Jesus toward their parents. Children are constantly bringing special hand-made treasures to parents as offerings of their love. A child's love is often spontaneous and in many ways more pure like Mary's love for Jesus at the dinner.

As a parent, I am reminded that I should take more time to appreciate the special gifts that my children give me. Many times life is spinning so fast that I forget to notice these offerings of love. Jesus took the time not only to appreciate Mary's gift, but also to validate it by his words. I believe that we all give and receive this pure love throughout our lives. Stopping long enough to recognize and appreciate this amazing gift is truly a gift in itself.

Tracey Hudson

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 25, 2010

In this passage, we witness a profound act of love, and an all-too-human reaction against it. The setting is both warm and foreboding. Jesus is surrounded by close friends at a dinner given for him in the home of Lazarus. However, they know that the chief priests and Pharisees are searching for Jesus and want to arrest him. Plus, we know that Jesus is just one week away from his betrayal and crucifixion. Out of extraordinary love, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume—worth a year's wages for a laborer—and wipes his feet with her hair. Judas objects, asking why the perfume was not sold and the money given to the poor.

On the surface, Mary's act does seem extravagant. We easily identify with Judas' point. Out of fear for our own future, we ourselves often want to hold back. Our culture tells us that a penny saved is a penny earned. Our faith tells us to be good stewards. Our financial advisors tell us that we must save our money for a possible job loss, for our children's education, for our retirement, and for our long-term care. In tough economic times such as we currently have, these messages are amplified all the more. Given all that, how dare anyone spend that kind of money on such an extravagant, seemingly useless gift?

Of course, we cannot ignore the advice we have been given. We must be good stewards of our money, give wisely, and save for the future. However, we cannot be so consumed with our money, and fearful for the future, that we forget to love. Mary was not like that: she fearlessly and lovingly anointed Jesus' feet, filling the house with the fragrance of sweet perfume, and giving no thought to the perfume's worth. Judas failed to see the love in this act, focusing only on the expense.

Jesus said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." This is true for our loved ones as well: we may not always have them with us. It is too easy to let money, especially the fear of not having it, get in the way of love. Many times, I have said petty, unloving things in arguments over money. These arguments were really about my fears and my desire to control, and in these arguments, I forgot to love.

We live in a world where we will always have financial worries, but we will not always have our loved ones with us. Don't forget to love.

Paul McKibben

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 26, 2010

In an old Cherokee legend, a grandfather is talking to his young grandson and tells the boy that everyone has two wolves inside of him struggling with each other. The first is the wolf of peace, love and kindness. The other wolf is one of fear, greed and hatred. "Which wolf will win, grandfather?" Asks the young boy. "Whichever one you feed," is the reply.

In today's scripture story, John gives us an illustration of both wolves.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus sought the company of his good friend Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Judas Iscariot and the other disciples are also there for the feast Martha has prepared. As Martha serves, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume made from nard, which was imported from the Himalayas. After washing Jesus' feet, Mary humbles herself by undoing her hair (Jewish women never did that in public) and using her hair to dry his feet. Her actions showed her gratitude and love for her friend and teacher and most of all, Mary's understanding of what was to come for Jesus.

Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would later betray Jesus, took issue with Mary about such an extravagant waste of money when the nard could have been sold for 300 denarii and used for the poor. Judas controlled the money box and secretly stole from it for his own good. In his criticism of Mary, Judas projected a religious façade of caring for the poor in order to shift the focus from what he thought was too much love and devotion given to Jesus. The argument Judas made sounded admirable, but his scheming hid his secret sin of greed. The way people appear and what they say can deceive us when we assume their moral and spiritual values are the same as ours.

Let us pray today about the ways that we deceive ourselves, and others, and how we can better feed the wolf in us that we want to thrive and live on—that which will bring joy to His heart by our worship, work and witness.

Pat Pendleton

Lenten Meditations

2010

All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 27, 2010

Until now, I had always thought of the story of raising Lazarus from a physical perspective—Lazarus' physical body had died and Jesus brought him back to life. Today, I see it from quite another side. Two years ago I had an experience. Some have called it a "white light" or "burning bush" experience, though I choose to call it God's grace. At the time, I was spiritually bankrupt, dead. For no doing of my own, a sudden, brief feeling of calmness, quiet, peace, warmth came over me. It was a feeling that I have never felt before and I know now that it was a moment of clarity, of God's love. I did not want the feeling to end and when it did I wanted it back, badly. This experience led me down a road of spiritual recovery that has brought me back from the dead. My journey this far in life has shown me that you can be deceased inside and still be breathing. Until that moment, I had been walking this earth dead. Today I am grateful that I, like Lazarus, was raised up and brought back to life by God's grace.

Oh how I can relate to Judas and judgement... I had lived my entire life in fear and judgement. I judged every moment good or bad. I judged every person, feeling inferior or superior to them... this is not true for me today. Today I do my best to "live and let live." I try to not judge, and when I am able to this is when I feel more connected to God. When I don't nurture my spirit through prayer and meditation, my soul is poor and I am unable to have God with me each moment. For me it is important to carry God with me throughout each day. Its very interesting how easily my mind will take me away from God. It's a yucky place to be. Fearful and judgmental... lonely.

For me, God is always accessible in the here and now. As long as my mind is quiet, and free from fear and judgement, I am able to feel a presence greater than myself. My mind can easily jump to the future (which isn't my reality) or live in the past (which isn't my reality either), but if I practice being mindfully present in the moment, I am able to be with God—and others—always.

Mike Phillips