

“Finding and Loving *Now*”  
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Today’s gospel reading, featuring a woman whose actions are viewed with suspicion, reminds me of the story about two monks who are walking at sunrise by the banks of a stream, swollen by the early spring rains. As they round a bend, they see a young woman standing in the middle of the stream, holding up her heavy skirt, which was dripping with icy water. She had lost her footing while trying to scramble from rock to rock; tears were rolling gently down her face. The older monk hitches up his robe, strides out into the stream, and scoops up the woman in his arms. Having carried her safely across, he deposits her gently on the other bank. She thanks him with great relief, and the two monks resume their journey. When the sun sets and the monks are released from their vow of silence they keep during daylight hours, the younger monk turns to his brother with fury, shaking his fists and shouting: “How could you have picked up that woman! You know we have vowed not even to look at a woman, let alone touch one. You have broken your vows, sullied your honor, and offended God.” The older monk smiles patiently at the younger man and replies: “My dear brother, I put that woman down on the other bank of the stream 10 hours ago. You are the one who has been carrying her around all day.” (*7 Paths to God*, page 73)

It was a controversial thing to do, what the older monk did, and it was a beautiful act of devotion. Think with me about another act. All four gospel narratives record this episode in which Jesus is anointed, but they differ and in a number of ways. Matthew and Mark place this story in the home of Simon the Leper. Luke has it in the house of a Pharisee, and John seems to imply that the location is the home of Lazarus (and Mary and Martha), who was there with them, raised from the dead not long before, remember. Luke suggests that the woman in questions was a sinner, code for, well, I suspect you know. But in today’s reading, John tells us that the woman is Mary, the sister of Martha, who anoints Jesus’ feet and not his head as in Matthew and Mark. And only John’s account names the disciple who is critical of Mary for using expensive oil. Not having used all the oil to anoint him, Jesus says to Judas: “Let her alone; let her keep whatever is left; she can use it for the day of my burial.” (John 12:7) And Luke has Jesus say: “Oh, she has done a beautiful thing.”

What’s going on here? And what are we to make of Jesus statement that we will always have the poor with us? First, the beautiful act: Jesus tells Judas that Mary bought the perfume to keep for the day of his burial. But rather than save it for that day, she uses it when he’s still alive and well—something in her can’t wait. She anoints Jesus’ not for burial but for his walk toward death. And she did it for love, this risky act; it is what we do when we know time is growing short.

And the poor “always being with us?” This statement is often misunderstood and conveniently misused. Nothing we know of Jesus suggests that he yawned and said that day: “Oh, you’ll always have the poor hanging around,” as if we should expect to grow complacent about this fact. No. Jesus says that helping the poor will always be a primary way of expressing our devotion to God; there will never be a Friday night in Port Angeles when somebody will not be hungry. Every Friendship Dinner is an expression of love and devotion, and it will always be so.

But on that day, Mary seems to know that Jesus will not be with her much longer, and her devotion to Jesus results in an act of reckless beauty. Something in her could not wait. And so she anoints his feet.

Three or so years ago, I shared a poem with you by Rhina Espaillat, and it seems like the perfect ending for today's story. "Find something, and love it all you can," Espaillat writes. "It should be something close—a field, a man (or woman), a line of verse, a mouth, a child asleep—that feels like the world's heart since time began. Don't measure much or lay things out or scan; don't save yourself for later, you won't keep; spend yourself now on loving all you can. It's going to hurt. That was the risk you ran with your first breath; you knew the price was steep, that loss is what there is, since time began subtracting from your balance. That's the plan, too late to quibble now, you're in too deep. Just love what you still have, while you still can. Don't count on schemes, it's far too short a span from the first sowing till they come to reap. One way alone to count, since time began: love something, love it hard, now, while you can." (Rhina Espaillat, *Her Place in These Designs*)