

Resurrection Living: Caring for Each Other
May 12, 2019
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
John 12:1-8
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

My friend Erin wrote the following: My brother died in 2015. I found him in his apartment barely responsive, shirtless and covered in fecal matter. 911 was summoned and I met them at the emergency room. After initial intake, I started to wash his body. It was hospital soap and rough linens (not the finest perfume). He had been somewhat agitated as the nurses and technicians checked him in, but when I was alone with him, he let me wash him. As I washed him, I know I spoke to him but I don't remember what I said. I had no concept that I was preparing him for his death, but I knew I was washing him so that the people in the hospital knew he was loved. He was my big brother and he was loved immensely.¹

I wonder if Mary didn't feel the same way my friend Erin felt.

Here was Jesus – someone she loved immensely, someone who had given her back her dear brother, someone who they considered to be one of the family. Here he was, again surrounded by people – some of whom loved him, some who were curious about him, some who were inevitably there to challenge him. He had likely had a long day and yet was expected to be at the top of his game in conversation around the dinner table. And Mary loved him so much that she wanted to do something special for him.

And so, John tells us, “Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”²

¹ Erin Leraris, as posted on Facebook.

² John 12:3, NRSV.

Of course, if we've been around the church for very long, we might know that in the Gospel of John, this story leads in to the events of Holy Week. We might know that the perfume she used was the same perfume that was often used to prepare bodies for burial. We might know that Judas, who spoke out against her act, would soon betray Jesus. And so, often we hear this only as a story about Jesus...only about him becoming more ready on the way to the cross...only about how the people around him were becoming more and more divided, choosing sides, finding themselves in positions to declare whether they were for him or against him.

And there is much we can learn about Jesus' story from this passage.

Meanwhile, if all we learn is about Jesus' story, then this is nothing more than a glimpse backward, a glimpse into history.

So, I read this and find that I can't help but ask myself, "So what?" Other than another glimpse into who Jesus was...other than another step toward his crucifixion...what does this text offer *us*? What can *we* learn that can change who *we* are?

Because again I remind you that this is the Easter season. Easter isn't just about one day on the calendar when we celebrate a resurrection that we embrace even without understanding. Easter isn't just a celebration of who Jesus was. Easter isn't just a theological claim of resurrection.

Easter *is* a way of life. It is about a change in *our* lives. It is about being and becoming every day more fully who God created us to be.

So, what does this story teach us – not just about someone who lived two thousand years ago – but what does it teach us about how to live today?

Well, what did Mary do? She cared, in the most intimate of ways, for Jesus. And before we think this story is only about what we do for Jesus, let us remember that in the very next

chapter of John's gospel we see Jesus, whose feet Mary washed in today's reading, turn to *his* disciples and wash *their* feet.

And we can remember that foot washing, while we read it as a beautiful act of care in these two stories, was also simply a necessary act of hospitality and cleanliness. Sandaled feet on dusty roads not only felt better after being washed, but caused less of a mess. And often feet were washed in Jesus' time, not by one's closest friends, but by the household servants.

And yet, in both this story and the one of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, more than just a necessary foot washing is going on. Yes, it seems that we should be listening not to the means but to the message, not focusing on the foot washing, but on the love that was given in that act.

So, again I ask: what does resurrection living look like? If this story isn't only about Jesus, and if her act isn't only about cleaning his feet, what can we glean that tells us something about how we are called to live?

It seems that from this story we are reminded that resurrection living looks like people who pay enough attention to see one another's needs *and* who take time to respond.

And this isn't just about the big needs out there. This isn't just about the realities that will always be part of our lives and communities. Remember, there is in this text the conversation about whether or not Mary used her resources well by washing Jesus' feet with such an expensive perfume when so many poor were around them.

And Jesus' response doesn't diminish the needs of the poor. In fact, those who were familiar with the Jewish scriptures would have heard in his answer the reference to Deuteronomy 15 which says, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."³ In pointing out

³ Deuteronomy 15:11, NRSV.

that the poor would always be there, Jesus didn't dismiss their needs, rather he affirmed the ongoing work on responding to them.

See, this is a case of both/and. Yes, the poor will always be with us and they need our attention AND sometimes we simply need to take care of each other.

It seems, as we live into this resurrection season, that this is a message we don't want to miss. After all, how often do we neglect our own needs and those of people closest to us in the name of important work out in the world? How often do we neglect our own needs and those of people closest to us in the name of completing the task at hand or getting the job done? How often is it those closest to us who get the least of us and the worst of us?

I remember as a teenager attending the funeral of an older gentleman from my church. He was greatly admired in the church. We children sat in awe of his kindness and generosity. How shocked I was to hear his son talk about a father who was largely absent from his life as all his energy went to others. And yet I feel sure that the man who I admired would never have intended to neglect his child. I feel sure that without ever meaning to, he looked right past those who were closest to him as he tended to the needs of the world.

And yet, here sits Mary, at the feet of Jesus because she knew that he too needed to be taken care of. Here sits Mary, one who was willing to pay attention not just to the tasks and expectations, but to the people in her midst...one who made taking care of her friend Jesus a priority.

So, what would our community look like if we not only filled the bins with items for the Food Pantry and DVIP, if we not only worked together on building a Habitat House, if we not only raised money to support many families and communities through Heifer International, if we not only wrote letters to our elected officials asking them to adopt legislation that takes care of

the most vulnerable among us, if we not only marched in the Pride parade to make clear our welcome...while all of these are important and while we will keep doing them...what would our community look like if we also were intentional about looking one another in the eye and offering care to each other?

I remember one day visiting a dear 97-year-old in the hospital. As she lay in that bed she looked at me and said, “We don’t say, ‘I love you,’ often enough. We assume people know it. We say it after they die. But we don’t tell each other as often as we should.”

As Mary sat at Jesus’ feet with perfume that cost a year’s wages...with perfume that was supposed to be kept for a burial...she claimed that he was important today, that he should be cared for today, that he needed to know how much he was loved today.

So do we.

What if...what if we brought out the good china and served a meal to someone who was always taking care of others? What if we slowed down long enough to look someone in the eye as we said, “How are you?” and then to really listen? What if we not only encouraged each other to be doing important things in the world, but also gave opportunities to each for sabbath and renewal? What if at the end of a long day of marching or working together, we washed one another’s feet?

Resurrection living is about many things but let us not neglect each other in our efforts to transform the world. Let us not forget the one down the pew, the one with whom we will ride home today, the one who is always taking care of everyone else. And let us learn to care for each other with the tenderness and commitment of Mary.

Amen.