A Generous Spirit
John 12:1-8

Each of the 4 gospels has a story of a woman anointing Jesus - but the details vary. All 4 agree that the incident happened in Bethany, but from there on the stories diverge considerably. It says something about the significance of this story, I think, that all 4 Gospel-writers include it in their writings.

Luke’s version, unlike the others, is set near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and is about “a woman of the city, who was a sinner” (implying that she was probably a prostitute). When she “wet his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed his feet and finally anointed them with ointment”, it was almost too much for Jesus’ host, Simon the Pharisee, who just about “blew a gasket” when he witnessed this brazen display of affection. Jesus used the occasion to tell a parable and teach about forgiveness and grace.

Matthew’s and Mark’s versions are similar to each other, with an anonymous woman anointing not Jesus’ feet, but his head - a small detail that can be easily overlooked but which is crucial to understanding the woman’s actions.

- Anointing the head usually signified selection for some special role or task - a king was anointed, for example, when assuming his throne.
- Anointing the feet, on the other hand, was much more an act of hospitality and refreshment, a display of affection and devotion.
- In the anointing, there is also an allusion to anointing a dead body for burial - a detail which is not lost, given the proximity of this event to the events of Holy Week and Good Friday.

Here in the Gospel of John, the woman is not anonymous - neither is she described as “a sinner”. She has a name: Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, all 3 of them friends and disciples of Jesus.

Most of the time, we do kind of like we do with the Christmas Story, we lump all 4 stories together. And usually come up with an image of a sinful, sensual, brazen woman blubbering away at Jesus’ feet, anointing his feet with ointment, kissing his feet, and then wiping up her tears and the excess ointment with her long, tangled hair - [a disheveled, quivering, pathetic mess lying on the floor at Jesus’ feet] - needy and subordinate, a recipient of much-needed mercy and forgiveness. Although no scriptural evidence exists to support the theory, many have concluded that the woman was Mary Magdalene, stereotyped throughout Christian history as an archetype of woman’s sexual sinfulness.

But John paints a very different picture: a confident, poised, self-assured woman who was not only known to Jesus, but loved by him as well - Mary.

It was a difficult time for Jesus, and for those around him. It was close to the end - six days before the Passover. Jesus’ disciples still didn’t understand – [or believe] - what was going on. But Mary did understand. Wrenched to the heart by the suffering that lay just ahead for her good friend Jesus, she performed a tender act of loving-kindness. She had come not to receive anything from Jesus (as the popular interpretation of this story always seems to suggest), but to give something to Jesus.

What a welcome and healing balm it must have been to Jesus to be so lovingly anointed. His loneliest hour was approaching, his closest friends were turning away in confusion and fear, his death was in view. In the midst of all of this - Mary let him know that she understood; and Jesus, in turn, knew that he was not alone.

In this act of anointing, Mary transforms a servile, practical task – [washing the feet of a guest] - into an act which signifies her own transformation. Her courageous violation of ingrained traditional custom tells us that she has absorbed Jesus’ message very well. She has no doubt witnessed Jesus’ healing of women as well as men.....she has seen Jesus touch the “untouchable”.....she has seen Jesus heal on the Sabbath.....she has seen Jesus speaking to women in public. Mary – [like her mentor, Jesus] – doesn’t seem to be concerned with what people will think or say about her. She is not constrained by the demands of a false protocol or of an oppressive society’s expectations.
Mary has found her own unique way of showing her affection and devotion.

- Was Martha, her sister, shocked and amazed at Mary’s brazen act? **Probably!**
- Did her brother, Lazarus, think that Mary was getting all uppity and bold? **Likely!**
- Did Mary care? **Apparently not!**
- And Jesus, what a surprising and frankly sensual gift she gives to him!

Mary **is**, undoubtedly, a “generous spirit”. Mary **has** a “generous spirit”. [And I’m trusting that my use of the term “generous spirit” isn’t lost on you!] I know that to say that “generosity” is a good thing is like saying that “motherhood and apple pie” are good things!! But “generosity” is a much deeper concept than we might, at first, recognize.

Last Fall, when we had our annual Stewardship Campaign, the Generous Spirit committee noted that we usually have a “stewardship sermon” in the month of October or November, and that I’ve usually been the one to preach that sermon. “But”, I said last Fall, “after 39 years in ministry, I **don’t think I have another stewardship sermon left in me!**” So we decided to “give it a pass” for that year.

But then – [as if serendipitously] – I came across two things: 1) **one**, the review of a new book called “The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose”; and 2) **secondly**, an article in the October issue of The United Church Observer, by a past Moderator, David Giuliano. And all of a sudden, **I had one more stewardship sermon left in me after all – and I guess this is it!**

In his article in The Observer, David Giuliano tells the story of a man in his community; he called him “Gregor”. Gregor was successful, professionally - and very well off. But he was unhappy. He said, “I’m grateful for what I have. I count my blessings. I have everything. But I’m sad all the time”. “I wonder why you’re sad?”, Giuliano asked him. “Well, I’m a selfish man”, he said. “I’m greedy. And I never think of anyone but myself.”

“And it’s true”, Giuliano said. “I’ve known Gregor for a decade and cannot think of a single thing he has done for someone else. He often calls on me in a crisis, but does not support the church. He doesn’t volunteer with service organizations. He has never donated money to a charity. **Gregor is grateful, but he is not generous**”.

Giuliano further reflects (quote): “Gregor is a profoundly wounded man, someone who has never experienced the link between **gratitude** and **generosity**. He is an extreme example, but many of us fail to comprehend this connection. Even those who are both **grateful and generous** are sometimes unaware of how intimately the two are interwoven. **It is as though Gregor breathes in, but never breathes out.**” Continuing the “breathing” analogy, Giuliano concludes: “**Gratitude is inhaling. Generosity is exhaling. Gratitude and generosity: the two are as singular as a breath.**” (end quote)


“The Paradox of Generosity” is a tale of two very different kinds of people and two very different ways of life. Apparently Jesus was correct when he said that “**it is more blessed to give then to receive.**”

- **Some of us**, according to Smith and Davidson, take Jesus’ admonition to heart, and grew into people blessed with a **spirit of generosity** that is demonstrated in our actions. As a result, they report, we **enjoy better health, more happiness, and a greater sense of purpose and satisfaction in our lives.**
- **Others of us**, on the other hand, are focused primarily on **acquiring things and holding on to them**, seldom sharing ourselves or our possessions with others. Associated with this “grasping posture” are **poorer health, less happiness, and a loss of meaning and sense of purpose for our lives.**

Smith and Davidson document this connection in great detail; they show repeatedly that there is a **consistent positive correlation** between **generosity** and **well-being**. The more generous one is, the happier one is. [They’re careful to caution that correlation is not causation, simply connection.] They argue that the relationship between generosity and well-being is best understood as **reciprocal** and **mutually reinforcing.**
But there is another whole aspect to this story, apart from “generosity”, that has to be addressed. In 3 of the 4 gospel accounts of this event, we have the disciples (in John’s case it is Judas) complaining about the wastefulness and the extravagance of the woman’s generosity: “Why was this ointment not sold.....and the money given to the poor?” [All of a sudden Judas has a “social conscience!”] And Jesus’ response: “The poor you always have with you, but you will not always have me”.

Now we need to say right away that no one should ever even think about using these words of Jesus to justify not helping those who are in need. Justice and compassion are so central to the gospel message that no one who takes Jesus seriously could ever misunderstand this.

I think that what was happening here was that Jesus was pointing an accusing finger at the self-righteous, the narrow, the ones who had no capacity to celebrate and appreciate beauty.

- Mary obviously felt really good about giving Jesus this very personal and intimate gift.
- And Jesus surely felt very good about receiving Mary’s gift.
- But Judas – Judas comes across in this story as a petulant, self-righteous prig!

I believe that Jesus said then - [and I think that he would say today] - that being in solidarity with the poor/oppressed/marginalized is a constant requirement, but that it does not “take the place” of personal acts of love for people in our lives - friends, partners, children or strangers. To give money to benefit the poor but to refuse to comfort and assist the one right beside us is just as wrong as ignoring the plight of the poor in order to concentrate on only our own personal needs.

In response to Judas’ attempt to establish an either/or love (either you love Jesus or you love the poor), Jesus affirms the kind of both/and love that Mary has shown.

While lack of concern for the poor is always suspect, so is the refusal to celebrate a beautiful deed that stirs the heart. Art and music and poetry are not luxuries; they, too, are necessary to full human life.

As I was thinking about this text this week, I remembered Thomas Troeger’s hymn, “A Spendthrift Lover is the Lord”. In this hymn, Troeger imagines God as a generous spirit, an extravagant lover, whose love has no particular use, but just is. It’s not practical or sensible or measured. It’s extravagant and generous and reckless – to the point of being “out of control”:

“A spendthrift lover is the Lord
who never counts the cost
or asks if heaven can afford
to woo a world that’s lost”.

This is the One after whom we pattern our lives – this “spendthrift lover” whose love, grace and generosity knows no bounds.

We – like Mary – are called to have a “generous spirit” – we are called to be “generous spirits”.

Thanks be to God!

Warren McDougall
Richmond Hill United Church
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