

April 7th, 2020
 Monday in Holy Week
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The Monday in Holy Week is very, very significant to me. On it we remember the Anointing at Bethany by Mary, one whom Jesus loved. Most parishes don't do much with it, so I always feel lucky to have a seminary chapel at which to celebrate it.

This year we don't get to do that.

I look back on all the holy weeks I've spent at seminary of the southwest. Some stand out particularly. One in 2000 the one time my parents visited before my father died in September.

As I was looking back on my hard drive for homilies for today, I remember the one in 2018 after the bombs had blown up on people's porches in Austin all during the month of March....

This year we all share one fear, around the world and here in Austin, Texas, fear of the spread of disease. Holy Week 2020 begins as Surgeon General says on Sunday television to prepare this week for "our Pearl Harbor."

Let's look at the text and the story:

Mary of Bethany does with gesture what here sister Martha did with speech, John chapter 11... last Monday, "I believe that you are the Son of God, the Christ, the one coming into the world.

Mary does it without words, but with a substance, a material thing, "a pound of costly perfume of pure nard" and physically with the caressing of hands and the caressing/wiping/stroking of hair.

Silent performance by one of the students in B2310 Bible for Preaching who, when her turn came for her project, crawled under the desks in 210 and touched/washed/held the feet of her classmates at their chairs one by one

silence/ shock/ tenderness

All of Holy Week brings up close the role of the body in our sacred story. On almost every other past year, because - everybody's embarrassed about footwashing and super charged intimacy of the the anointing, I and other clergy encourage people to overcome squeamishness and embrace the physicality of Holy Week.

I emphasize our incarnational, fleshy faith, especially all the physical images in John, who is in the bosom of the father, reclining on the heart of Jesus, etc.

BUT this year we are prevented from doing those physical intimate things, eating together in large family or church groups, washing feet,
 NOW WE WISH WE COULD. WE REALIZE HOW ESSENTIAL TOUCH IS TO BEING HUMAN, BEING IN RELATIONSHIP.

Let's think about this body. In our fleshliness, our created selves, we have five senses, touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell, and the amazing gospel of John arouses and engages all of them.

And the senses do not operate in isolation from the others, but work together, like the parts of the body or even of the body of Christ.

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" (1 Cor 12:17)

In sensory deprivation of this strange "physical/social distancing" we are granted some sensual access to one another:

through sight, electronically enabled, video

through sound, electronically enabled, phone, audio

through taste, the food we now eat at home

through smell, the flowering trees we breathe when we go outside for a walk.

It's touch primarily, that we are denied. The Son close to the Father's heart in the bosom of the Father, the disciple whom Jesus loved, reclining next to Jesus, leaning on Jesus' bosom.

Do you know how people who are blind can develop hearing so keen it becomes like sight?

Do you know how the deaf read bodies, hands, faces in motion as a language?

Do you know how music lives in the brain, deeply asleep and can be rearoused and heard decades later?¹

The Deprivation of the sense of touch - and in person sight and in person voice - is in this moment teaching us to discipline and train and sensitize our other senses so we may be fully alive, and fully in relationship, even in our limitations.

That's what we are doing now, making the best of all this, inventing new ways to be connected and to worship and to tell the story of resurrection. sharpening and refining those senses we do have to "make up for" to compensate for/ to fill in for those who are denied.

That poem by Lynn Unger entitled "Pandemic" (see the website) "do not reach out your hands, reach out your heart, reach out your words...."

Voices fill in for hands. Hearts fill in for hands and words.

¹ The work of neurologist Oliver Sacks has wonderful accounts of these phenomena.

Now Back to the story of Mary the anointer -

Notice how the sense of touch is engaged in the relationship between Mary, the oil, the hands, the feet, the hair.

It is not a financial transaction.

It is not generic.

It is time sensitive.

And it is shared, shared among those at dinner, shared among those who have not been touched and whose feet are dry. John the Evangelist writes: "and the fragrance of the perfume filled the whole room"

Smell fills in for touch.

Each who breathed the scent of the nard, each felt the touch of Mary, and each took part in the relationship of love.

And together they began the extended process of saying goodbye.

At the opening of Holy we begin the extended liturgy of saying good bye to Jesus, and we prepare for the loss of life, the immense grief of those who mourn, for the corporate trauma of this moment.

We hold on fiercely, humbly, imperfectly, passionately, to our faith which knows goodness mightier than evil and love stronger than death

Let us engage our sacred stories and one another with all our senses, with our whole bodies, compromised as they are, beginning with Mary of Bethany, and breathe the fragrance that fills the whole world.

Amen.