

Let's Show Some Respect!

[Text - John 12:1-8]

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The story of Jesus being anointed by a woman with a precious ointment appears in all four Gospel accounts. In this morning's reading from *John*, this anointing is attributed to Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It's kind of the "cleaned-up" version of the story - a "respectable" woman who Jesus knows, preforms this loving deed. In the other accounts, the woman is identified as a public "sinner" - most likely a prostitute [which explains how she could afford such costly ointment]. Those accounts conclude with Jesus saying, "Truly I tell you, wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in all the world, what this woman has done will be told in remembrance of her." Strangely, however, the woman's name isn't included in those writings. [So much for *remembering* her!]

The truth is, this woman and her story have either been "cleaned-up" or basically ignored throughout much of the Church's history, because - let's face it - they are embarrassing! A woman of ill-repute, anointing the feet of Jesus and wiping them with her hair is scandalous! And although in *John's* account, it's only that *bad* disciple - Judas - who takes offence, the other Gospel writers indicate that all of the disciples are equally outraged and embarrassed. So while this woman is passionately pouring-out her love and devotion for Jesus, the disciples are complaining about how wasteful she is. She acts out of warm compassion, while they coldly calculate the monetary cost and the potential P.R. problem. Perhaps the biggest problem, is simply that she is a *woman*; and in a patriarchal society, the role of women in the life and ministry of Jesus often gets down-played, or even demonized.

Now, the reason I bring this up, isn't to fixate on the Church's past problems; it's to advocate for our Church's and our society's fullest potential - a potential that can only be realized when we embrace the gifts and abilities that each person has to offer. No society can devalue the worth and work of 50% of its population and expect to

fully thrive. Nor can people of faith demean or demonize other people's faith, and expect to advance the Divine Realm of compassion, peace, justice and unity. Early-on in the Church's life, the gifts and ministries of *all* members were readily recognized, welcomed and affirmed. A person's gender or social status really didn't matter. In the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters we read of women utilizing their gifts of teaching, preaching, healing, organization and administration - right there with the men!

Unfortunately, as Christianity becomes more institutionalized, the "Church Fathers" take charge, and begin to radically reduce the vital role of women. Writings which highlight women's involvement in Jesus' ministry and in the Church's early mission, are rejected from the canon of Sacred Scriptures. Women are denied leadership positions and treated as inferior, simply because they are *women*! Eventually, the Church's only truly virtuous woman is a Virgin...who raises a perfect son. [Good luck competing with that, ladies!] So, contrary to the teachings and Life-example of Jesus, who welcomes and affirms all people, the Church Fathers choose to disembody the Body of Christ - finding multiple ways to judge, exclude and separate people, rather than including, affirming and uniting them. And Jesus' example of self-giving service and compassion, is replaced by a system of self-serving power and control.

Councils are called to strictly define "Doctrines of Faith." And if you didn't confess those Doctrines of the Holy Trinity, or the Incarnation, or Christ's Real Presence in the bread and cup of Communion, you were excommunicated, labeled a heretic, or far worse! Over time, Christ's call to care for the *physical* needs of others - feeding the hungry, healing the sick, freeing the oppressed - was replaced by the religious duty of "saving people's *souls*" - even if it meant torturing or killing them in the process. Apparently, the question "W.W.J.D. - What Would Jesus Do?" [or in this case, What Would Jesus *Not* Do?"] - got lost in the Church's testosterone-driven leadership.

The primary mission of Jesus Christ is to help all people experience, and share, the abundance of life. His open and welcoming nature

invites us *all* to live to the fullest - to celebrate how wonderfully [and differently] each one of us is made. And the one specific commandment Jesus gives us, is that we love one another just as he loves us - freely and fully, without judgment, and without holding-back. This is the marvelous model that the woman who anoints Jesus gives us. She lovingly opens her heart and lavishly pours-out her gift and gratitude to the One who has loved and embraced her. And by doing so, she not only provides comfort and encouragement to Jesus as he heads toward the Cross, she also give us a beautiful example of how we can live-out our faith: lavishly, lovingly, without judgement, and without reservation.

Another remarkable example that the women around Jesus provide us, is their tremendous courage and commitment. At his crucifixion, most of the men run and hide, but the women boldly take their stand at the cross, staying with Jesus in his most agonizing time of suffering and death. Even after death claims him, these brave women *still* claim him, and they follow to see where his body is laid to rest. Then they go to prepare another precious ointment, to once again anoint his body. By Easter morning, however, the time for anointing is over; and the time for rejoicing has begun!

Because of their commitment and courage, these *women* are the first to discover that neither fear, nor hatred - not even death itself - can stop the Divine Love and Grace which is embodied in Jesus Christ. And because of their tremendous loyalty and dedication, they should hold a place of highest honor within the Body of Christ. Their steadfast resolve to not simply go away, or stay hidden in the shadows, can be an inspiration to us all, as we strive to be the Holy - and *Whole* - Body of Christ in this world.

I truly believe that the most important ministry of this Community of Faith is that we continue to actively invite, welcome, and affirm all those people who society and religion so often devalue and summarily dismiss. This not only strengthens the Body of Christ, it can also help bring wholeness and peace to our troubled and broken world. Because when genuine love is actually practiced in our churches, it

has a much better chance of being realized in our larger society and throughout our entire world!