

A Meal, Interrupted

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Text: John 12:1-9

From time to time, and most frequently around Christmas and Easter, I will celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion in their homes or in nursing homes with people who are unable to be physically present in church on Sunday mornings. I use a little traveling communion kit. It has a small brass tray to hold the communion wafers, a little plastic bottle for the grape juice, and little plastic glasses, which feels like an oxymoron, like the ones we use for our communion services here in church. Every once in a while I'll discover that I didn't empty the unused grape juice from the little plastic bottle after I last used it, and, depending on how long ago that was, the contents will have changed in interesting ways, once in an explosive way. The wafers are as indestructible as Twinkies, but without the taste, and the little glasses can present problems for people with arthritic fingers, or for people with shaky hands, or for people whose depth perception has been impaired by macular degeneration. But we manage, and it's always a meaningful experience for me and, I hope, for the people to whom I bring the Lord's Supper.

One of the things I've noticed about these home communions is that they are always more informal than our communions here in the sanctuary. It's not unusual for someone to interrupt our little service with a question, or a comment. Once, during what we call the "Words of Institution," after I had said, "And Jesus took a cup," a woman looked at the little glass in her hand and said, "I'll bet it was bigger

than this.” Knowing this woman, I can’t imagine that she would have blurted out that comment during a worship service in church, but there, in the intimacy of her home, sitting at the kitchen table, it seemed perfectly natural, and we both laughed. In fact, as I was driving back to the church it occurred to me that her little interruption had been insightful. Here I was, using Jesus’ language of generosity and even extravagance--“my blood poured out for you,” he had said--and there we had been, drinking of the fruit of the vine from these tiny little cups, cups more appropriate for a child’s dollhouse than the kind of banquet setting around which Jesus and his followers would have gathered to observe a Seder meal. So much grace, in such a small container!

Hers had been a holy interruption.

The setting for today’s reading from the Gospel of John is one of those very few episodes that appear in all four gospels, which should tell us something. But there are some interesting differences. John is the only one of the gospel writers to place it in the Bethany home of Mary, Martha and their recently resurrected brother Lazarus. Matthew and Mark have it in Bethany, but in the home of Simon the Leper. In Luke, the host is Simon the Pharisee. Like John, Matthew and Mark locate this dinner toward the end of Jesus’ ministry, as he was about to make that final visit to Jerusalem. Luke has it early on in his history of Jesus’ life and teachings. In Matthew, Mark and John, the thrust of the story is the same: a woman, identified by John as Mary and unidentified in Matthew, Mark and Luke, interrupts a meal with Jesus, and proceeds to anoint him with her tears and expensive ointment. Matthew and Mark say that “the disciples” were scandalized by this extravagance; John says that it was Judas alone who expressed outrage about all that money being spent on expensive ointment. In Luke, the woman is described as a sinner, most likely meaning a prostitute, and the criticism of the woman comes from Jesus’ host, a Pharisee. His complaint isn’t about the

extravagance of the act, but rather that a woman, not to mention a woman of ill repute, had touched a rabbi in such an intimate way. In Matthew and Mark, the woman anoints Jesus' head; in Luke and John she bathes his feet in her tears and the ointment.

We can look at these discrepancies as inconsistencies in the historical record, or we can look at them as the honest efforts of four different gospel writers to tell us something important, and something different, about Jesus. Matthew, Mark and John want us to reflect on what Jesus had to say about the woman's extravagant act of love, and that we will do this morning; Luke wants us see Jesus as one who whose love and acceptance of even the most disreputable people always trumped the demands of the law, and that we will do as we work our way through Luke's gospel this year. For Matthew and Mark, the act of anointing Jesus' head is a reminder that Jesus is the Messiah, which means "the anointed one." For Luke and John the act of bathing Jesus' feet reminds us that Jesus is the servant of all, the one who washed his disciples' feet before another meal, the meal that we call "the Last Supper." Those seeming discrepancies in the gospels shouldn't be an obstacle to belief; rather they should deepen our understanding of how Jesus was viewed by those who were closest to him. They aren't a problem; they're a gift to us as we decide how we are going to see Jesus in our lives.

So let's turn back to that holy interruption as recorded by John in today's lesson. Of all the Gospel writers, John is the least interested in what we would call historical accuracy. John isn't so much interested in telling us what Jesus did; John wants to tell us what Jesus means. That's why he begins his gospel not with a story about Jesus' birth, as Matthew and Luke do, or even a brief historical framework, as Mark does. John begins with a statement about the meaning of Jesus in the universe, his meaning even before the beginning of time: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . .

. And the Word became flesh and made a home among us.” John is interested in what we might call the “big picture.” No event is significant in and of itself; the significance of each event derives from how it fits into and helps to complete the big picture that John is trying to paint.

One of the recurring motifs in John’s tapestry of Jesus’ life is the meal. And meals remain a recurring theme in the life of Jesus’ church. Often the first official visit to a church by a prospective pastor of a church, is, appropriately, in the context of a meal or a brunch, what is often described as a “meet and greet” occasion. And that’s a good and faithful thing. While we remember Jesus’ last meal as a sacrament, every meal that we have in this church, every brunch, every soup supper, every luncheon after a funeral, is sacramental. To the extent that we are thanking God for the bounty of creation, to the extent that we share that bounty with one another and with the wider community, we are drawing closer to God; we are seeing God in each others’ faces.

After all, didn’t Jesus perform the first of his signs at a banquet, a wedding feast? Do you remember back to that Epiphany reading from John’s gospel, how Jesus changed the tasteless water of purification to the rich wine of love? How that wine was delivered not in tiny little glasses, but in big barrels, more wine than anyone needed, more wine than an entire community could drink. And it was good wine, the best wine, better than anyone could ever imagine. It was the wine of God’s love, unfailing and generous beyond measure.

So it’s appropriate that at the very brink of the climactic events in Jerusalem, at this crucial moment in Jesus’ life—and remember that the word “crucial” comes from the Latin word for “cross”—at this moment, Jesus and his friends enjoyed an extraordinary meal in Bethany. John frames it in dramatic terms: there were death threats both before and after this meal. He tells us that the religious authorities

were on the lookout for Jesus after he had revived Lazarus from death, and that after the meal those authorities added Lazarus' name to the "Most Wanted" list. But there these friends were enjoying a meal, with death behind them and death in front of them; death in the very air they breathed, and the odor of death perhaps still clinging to the clothes Lazarus wore. They weren't in denial, because surely the evidence of doom was all about them; rather, they celebrated in defiance of fear, and in the open embrace of love. "There is no fear in love," the Apostle tells us.

While they were eating, Mary entered the room and performed her act of adoration, her bathing of Jesus' feet with ointment that was so expensive that it would have taken an average worker a year to earn enough to buy it. "Extravagant!" was the verdict of Judas. "Think of how many poor people you could have fed with that amount of money!"

Like many, perhaps most, of you, I was brought up by depression-era parents and grandparents to see "extravagance" as a dirty word. And I still bristle at the careless extravagance of the rich and powerful at the expense of the environment and of the wellbeing of others, particularly the poor. But this account in John isn't about worship of wealth and ostentation—there are plenty of words of judgment about that sin elsewhere in the gospels. This account of the meal in Bethany is about extravagant worship in response to Jesus' extravagant love. The bathing of Jesus' feet anticipates Jesus' bathing of his disciples' feet at the Last Supper. The meal served by the loving and dutiful Martha anticipates the meal hosted by a Jesus who, in the very face of death, poured out his life and his love for us, the meal that we call the Eucharist, the meal of thanksgiving, the ultimate extravagance.

Extravagance in love is no vice; it is, in fact, a requirement for God's kingdom—not to be measured out carefully, in dribs and in drabs, because we fear that there won't be enough, but poured out by the barrelful, joyfully, sloppily because God is the source of endless love, poured out in defiance of the death around us. When Mary poured out her love, lavished it on Jesus' feet, John tells us, the house was filled with the fragrance of perfume. The stench of impending death was dispelled by the fragrance of life; life in Christ, life of unending joy, life that partakes of eternity.

These are times when anger is seen as a virtue, when violence is seen not as the last recourse, but as the understandable first impulse. These are times when human selfishness is celebrated as a goal in and of itself. These are times when love is measured out carefully, grudgingly, always with conditions, as if the needy are greedy and the greedy are needy. These are times when the stench of death is always wafting over our public discourse.

In such times, let's be followers of Jesus. Let's let the fragrance of love fill the room of our lives, and the larger room of the world. Let's partake of the cup of blessing, life poured out for us. There's more than enough, way more than enough, barrels full, to change everything. Amen.