

***Gospels: Mark 14:3-9, John 13:1-20***

***word count: 1,434***

Lisa Brozek is a nurse who has specialized in oncology and hospice care. During the 1980's when the AIDS epidemic hit fast and hard, churches and institutions turned away in fear and judgment of people with AIDS. Not Lisa. She developed relationships with her new gay friends and patients in New York and took care of them when others would not come close out of fear. Lisa's work led her into places people did not want to go with clients no one wanted to touch.

In working with people in the final days of their lives, her perceptions about Holy Week have a visceral connection to the meaning of this time in the church calendar. In particular, Jesus' humble act of washing his disciples' feet are brought home in her everyday work. These are her own words as a congregant writing to her pastor: (with her permission)

"I don't know why, but I always feel my closest relationship with Jesus during Holy Week. I hear myself including, 'I'm so sorry' in my prayers and really wishing that I could somehow prevent the crucifixion every year. I am always so sad about those days leading up to Jesus' death.

"I like the message of being anointed and going out to anoint. I remember Michael Angst...my poor, sweet, befuddled patient who shuffled into the AIDS clinic with his wrists and ankles shackled with two armed deputies behind him.

"I can still see his thick glasses sliding down his nose and his stained, orange, jail-issued jump suit hanging on his skinny body. I was always glad they had to take the shackles off so I could do my IV therapy. I remember the awful smell wafting from his sneakers...no socks. His feet were blackened from the grime in the sneakers and fungus on his toes. I know that is an unpleasant image but I had to take those shoes off. I scolded him about not wearing socks and neglecting his feet. I couldn't send him back to jail that way.

"God Bless our social worker who volunteered to go get new shoes and socks as I got down to the business of cleaning those feet. The guards looked at me as if I was crazy. I think I teased, 'Michael, this is so disgusting' a couple of times as I changed the water in the basin again. It was only after the infusion was finished, the IV pulled, the new socks and shoes put on his feet, and the shackles reapplied for the trip back to jail that I paused to consider that it was Maundy Thursday.

"I didn't feel very holy at the time and I certainly didn't think what I did was out of the ordinary for a nurse doing a thorough job, but somehow, Michael has become important to me every year at this time. I spend time doing things that many people don't experience in their jobs and I feel blessed. So, as I was sitting in church one evening listening to the message I thought about my day...I was once again on my knees in front of a patient."

In the Gospel of Mark, before Jesus gets to Jerusalem, he stops at a home in Bethany where an unnamed woman breaks open an alabaster jar of expensive perfumed oil, and anoints Jesus' head. In the Gospel of John, this woman is named as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In this account, she anointed Jesus' feet with this oil, and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Her act, so intimate and humble, is extravagant beyond measure for two reasons—first the cost of the oil accounts for almost a year's wages. But second, it is extravagant because it is an act of caring that goes beyond the comfort level of most people. We recognize that for the most part, we are not people who feel drawn to lowering ourselves in an attitude of servanthood both public and self-effacing. And perhaps because we know that there should be more about our human

experience that brings us to see the pride within us that keeps us from giving so wholly of ourselves to serve others, we can see the nobility in this woman's gesture. The fragrance of her selflessness rises up to fill the space she inhabits like expensive perfume.

Days later, Jesus arrives at an upper room where he would share a Passover supper with his disciples. It is the last time he would be able to demonstrate his love and care for them. He took off his robe, tied a towel around his waist, and began washing their feet. Jesus told them that they should follow him, even in this—for if he was able to be a servant to them, they too should be able to do the things for each other that the world of pride around them would not do. He asks them, "Remember me." In the bread they share and the wine they drink, he asks his disciples to remember his presence with them whenever they meet to have a common meal.

Lisa remembers her patients. She shared this with me:

"Dennis is dying of cancer. He also happens to have a terrible case of peripheral vascular disease. His legs are swollen and purple. It's gotten so bad that his skin has split open in places from his calves to his feet. He had just gotten out of the shower today and his legs and feet were bare and the towel under his feet was saturated. His legs were leaking profusely, like tears just flowing down his legs—it was heart wrenching.

"I treated Dennis' legs and feet and wrapped them with absorbent dressings the best I could as we talked about the MRI he couldn't tolerate due to the pain and how he has decided to let go of his USC season tickets that he has proudly owned for over 35 years. Dennis has conceded that he won't be driving to games but hasn't grasped that he will not be here next year.

"As I packed up my bag and put away the supplies, he thanked me. My heart hurt a bit as it often does during my work week. I am both grateful that I was led to the work I am supposed to be doing on this earth and for the gift of empathy. Maybe that's why Jesus' death hurts so much. I can imagine being there and being one of the helpless, one of the betrayers, one of the ones with 'good intentions,' but unable to stop Jesus' pain and suffering. So, I hope that on some level, Jesus hears my 'I'm sorry.' I hope that my faith is leading me to do what Jesus would have wanted me to do for those people who are in some way entrusted to my care."

Lisa, through her work that is so centered on serving others in such a personal and intimate way, connects with the message of this week because she lives it on a daily basis. Serving, loving unconditionally, and taking the message Jesus brought to his disciples and to the world to her heart.

Like Dennis...like anyone we know and love deeply, it is difficult to come to the part of the story where we learn that someone will no longer be with us. Even as the disciples had their feet washed by Jesus, they did not realize this might be the last time he touched them. Like Dennis' story, "He won't be here next year" is the part of the narrative we enter into this week.

Serving, sharing, creating a level playing field. The willingness to kneel down to care for the person in front of us. Receiving a healing touch and seeing the love in another person's eyes. Loving extravagantly and wastefully. These are all part of the poignant message of tonight's commemoration in this gathering and through this meal and anointing, as Jesus himself was anointed. And then...it is about where we go from here.

"I like the message of being anointed and going out to anoint," said Lisa, as she wrote about Michael, who arrived in shackles with deputies behind him, the same Michael whose feet she washed before the very simple act of finding him dry shoes and socks, because she could not send him back to jail that way.

"I was sick and in prison, and you visited me," said Jesus. "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

"This bread is my body. Remember me...remember me...remember me."