

Brazen Acts of Beauty

When I read this account in John's gospel about the anointing of Jesus, what comes to mind is "Brazen Acts of Beauty. Brazen in the face of danger and poverty. Of all the stories that John could have told about Jesus, why did he tell this one. And why did he tell it the way that he told it? What is the storyteller trying to tell us about the character of Jesus?

I've studied this passage for decades and I'm still surprised at how full and lush, how brazen the details of this story are. I'm also aware that most of those lush and brazen details are all too often lost on 21st century ears. We are not first century Jews, so the brazenness of this act can all too easily escape us. There are details that first century Jews would have been overcome by details that we need to sniff out if we want to smell the pungent aroma of the spikenard that oozes, soothes, and anoints the feet of the one we claim to follow.

This story has but a dozen sentences, but each and every sentence positively oozes with details; details that can open us to a kind of brazenness of our own.

"Six days before the Passover. Every first century Jew would have understood that six days before the Passover, the biggest festival of the year, the roads and pathways would have been crowded with people heading to Jerusalem to celebrate. Jesus, too, would have been on his way to Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Each and every one of John's listeners would have known all too well what happened in Jerusalem.

They, like us, knew exactly what kind of execution awaited the political troublemaker. Bethany, a small town just outside of Jerusalem, six days before the Passover and we all know that Jesus will not be passed over. Jesus will be just like a lamb to the slaughter when the Romans are done with him. There will be no Exodus for Jesus, no blood upon the doorposts to save him.

Six days before Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, the village of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Lazarus, with his sisters Martha and Mary are the only three people in the bible who earn the distinction of being named as people "Jesus loved." Lazarus, the rumors were ripe about Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb. "There they gave a banquet in Jesus honor, at which Martha served."

Martha served; they would have heard of Martha's service before. But don't think of housework here. The Greek word *diakonia* is used here. At the end of the first century, the Greek word *diakonia* is a technical term used to refer to church leadership. Martha, at the end of the first century would have been a name that the story tellers listeners would have been familiar with because Martha was a leader among the followers of the Way. Martha presided at the Passover, the Passover Meal, the most important Jewish religious ritual of the first century.

Mary brought a jar of costly ointment, pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair. Mary, one of the three people named in the Bible as being loved by Jesus. Mary of Bethany, Jesus beloved, the woman the gospel storyteller's listeners would have remembered because Jesus praised her for concerning herself with Jesus' teaching. Mary, a student, a disciple of Jesus, interrupts the most important Jewish ritual of the year with a pound of costly ointment; a

pot of pure nard; incredibly expensive, a whole year's wages in the first century. It was pungent, the small would have been over-powering.

All eyes on Mary; a woman, her hair down, first century listeners would have had something to say about a woman in the company of men with her hair down. She lets her hair down, no honorable woman would do such a thing, and with the pungent smell of expensive spikenard permeating the room.

Mary proceeds to wipe Jesus feet with her hair. His feet, she pours perfume of Jesus' feet. His feet, that would have sent tongues wagging. Wait, just a minute, the listeners would have said. You mean to tell us that she anointed Jesus feet with oil, his feet, in the middle of a religious ritual? His head, maybe, people do that for kings, but not the feet. Only the dead have their feet anointed with oil What is John trying to tell us about Jesus?

Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples, - the one who was to betray Jesus – protested. Judas Iscariot – by the end of the first century the very mention of Judas Iscariot would have raised the hackles of any audience who knew of the execution of Jesus at the hands of the Romans, the Romans who had by the end of the first century, executed tens of thousands in Palestine, destroyed the Temple, burnt Jerusalem to the ground and sent each and every Jew into exile. The name Judas Iscariot had in just a few short decades become synonymous with the word betrayer.

Whether or not Judas Iscariot ever existed or was simply as Bishop Spong teaches, simply a literary character designed to stand in for every betrayer who has ever betrayed, you can be sure that the audience would have perked up at the mere mention of Judas. Just imagine the audacity of this character, selling Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver, and here he is protesting the use of a costly ointment as if he cares about the poor.

“Why wasn't this ointment sold? It could have brought nearly a year's wages, and the money given to the poor.” Even the gospel – storyteller can't keep up the pretense when he adds: “Judas didn't say this because he was concerned for poor people, but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the common fund and would help himself to it.”

Jesus responds to Judas, “Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. The gospel writer, John was Jesus, Jesus of all people say: You have the poor people with you always. But you won't have me.”

Jesus, the champion of the poor? Can he really be saying don't worry about the poor because the poor aren't going away. Of course not! Jesus was, is and forever shall be a Jew. The Gospel writer John was a Jew. The first century audiences would have been Jewish, or God fearers, who were Jew's in all but circumcision; the few Gentiles in the group would have been schooled in the Hebrew scriptures.

What our 21st century ears rarely hear is the echo of the scriptures that would have sounded loudly and clearly to our first century ancestors.

Remember, Jews learned their scriptures by heart. They could recite the words of Deuteronomy in the same way we can recite the words of commercials. So, hear that they would have heard, when

they heard the words “You have the poor with you always.” Hear the words of the 15th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted, or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission is near” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to God against you and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account, God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

Jesus says “The poor you will have with you always, but you will not have me with you always. You know exactly what to do about the poor, enough said, take care of the poor. You know what you need to do about the poor. You have no idea what to do about me.

So how do we deal with Jesus? What are we to do about Jesus? Poverty and Brazen acts of beauty, two realities. What are we who claim to follow Jesus to do about poverty and brazen acts of beauty.

Well, I can tell you what we are not supposed to do. We are not supposed to deal with the poor as if we don't have enough to help the poor. All too often, we act as if we are poor ourselves, as if we can't afford to help. We are among the wealthiest people on the planet and still we worry about whether or not we can afford to help the poor.

We earn more than our ancestors could ever dream of earning, we have more than our ancestors ever had and still we want to pay less taxes and spend less money for the common good. We live as if we scarcely have enough to get by, let alone help a neighbor or follow Jesus into the streets to feed the hungry and heal the sick. We have all been trained to worry and to be conservative and to act like tomorrow it will all be taken from us. It is not in us to do brazen acts of beauty.

I believe Judas is alive and well and walking among us. Sometimes he/she/they show up in me. Theirs is the voice that says, “Don't give case to that person panhandling on the street! How do you think they are going to use it! What a waste! Give to a nonprofit instead. That is far more pragmatic and efficient and thrifty. Underneath their rationalizing and their supposed tough love, they want more left over for themselves. They are fearful that they won't have enough or that what they have will be taken away from them.

Mary on the other hand, is overcome by love for the road worn, exhausted human being in front of her and can't help but pull out the most expensive thing in the house – spikenard, a whole jar of it, worthy the equivalent of an entire year's wages – and pours it all over him.

It is wildly impractical, and yet she does it with so much love, tenderness and gratitude.

Lisa “Tiny” Gray-Garcia”, a poverty scholar, whose teachings are based on her lived experience as an unhoused and marginally housed child, youth and adult, has often pointed out the inconsistency in how many of us evaluate people's use of resources. So many condemn the poor person for spending money on alcohol or narcotics or food deemed less than healthy, which harm no one

except possibly themselves. But no one is scrutinizing what the rich are doing with their money behind the thick walls of their fancy houses on the hill. Quite possibly they are investing it in things that decimate lives far beyond their own. Whose resources actually merit micromanagement, if we are going to micromanage?

But if Mary is our guide, maybe micromanagement is not the answer at all. Maybe brazen acts of beauty and extravagance and abundance and lavishness are called for. If Jesus is referencing Deuteronomy 15:11, then openhandedness is what is called for.

Of course, this message bumps up against the economic realities under which we are living. Even if we want to believe in God's abundance and give lavishly openhandedly, the reality is that too much of God's abundance is walled off in gated communities. We have to confront the system.

We need resilient networks of mutual care like the one represented by Jesus' relationship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and the others who accompanied and supported him on his journey and then continued it beyond his death.

Our work is to let money and resources flow like sweet water among us, giving, receiving, trusting, releasing and all the while challenging every way that the logic of capitalism threatens our lives.

Looking out at the world, it is easy to be overcome by all the need. Ukrainian refugees now on top of Syrian refugees and all the refugees from all the wars and violence – its overwhelming I know.

Brazen acts of beauty doesn't always cost money. Sometimes its about time. Sometime its about talent. Sometimes its about listening. Sometimes brazen acts of beauty is about the pure joy of loving and being loved.

Let it be said that we did brazen acts of beauty with the poor, with one another, with those we love and with ourselves. amen