

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time: June 12, 2016

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The account of the woman anointing Jesus' feet is found in all four Gospels. It must have held great appeal for listeners, before the Gospels were written down; or it must have been seen as a very important lesson by those who selected which of the many oral accounts of Jesus' life would get written down and what would be lost.

There are a number of reasons for its importance. First of all, the account is long and detailed. It provided a glimpse into Jesus' personality, his kindness and his willingness to engage his opponents, who never seemed to be far away. Second, it shows a very tender encounter between a sinner (who is a stand in for all of us) and a Savior who receives her personal gesture with approval, and assures her that her sins are forgiven. The passage is also important because it focuses on women. This is not unusual for St. Luke, whose Gospel is often described as the "women's gospel" because he frequently draws attention to them as following or seeking out Jesus. This particular story features not only the woman who anointed his feet, but also several other women who are actually named (Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna) plus "many others." These women are mentioned only in Luke's Gospel, apparently because he wants to make it clear that Jesus was not just a "guy's guy," but someone who held appeal for and offered healing to, both men and women. In fact, Luke includes them walking along with the Apostles, going from town to town apparently as equals. In Jesus' day, this must have been a truly remarkable sight.

The center of the story is the woman's actions toward Jesus, which seem absolutely weird to us. I doubt that any of us have ever used our tears even to wash someone's

hands, much less their feet. I'm willing to bet few of us have ever anointed someone's feet. But it was not as weird as it might seem. In ancient times, before cars and lace-up shoes, visitors often arrived barefoot or clad only in sandals. It was considered hospitable to offer water so that they could wash their feet (and presumably their hands) before they sat down to a meal.

But this woman goes beyond the call of duty. She uses tears and her own hair. Then she anoints Jesus' feet – not with any old discount-store oil, but with expensive ointment. (The other evangelists describe the ointment as “costly;” Luke says only that she carried it in an alabaster flask, an expensive vessel that suggests it contained something of value). She did this both to honor Jesus and to acknowledge him as Lord, for the anointing clearly suggested something royal or noble about Jesus. Since it seems she was not wealthy, she offered this tribute out of her substance.

The women in today's Gospel remind me of the women who founded and continue to sustain Catholic health care. Historically, there were women like Sister Blandina, who arrived in New Mexico to found St. Joseph's hospital; or Mercy Sister Mary McCauley, or Mary Potter, who founded the Little Company of Mary, or the seven Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet who travelled by wagon from St. Louis to Tucson in 1870. All of these women were honoring the Lord, giving everything they had, just like the woman in the Gospel used her own hair. Like the Gospel women, they knew Jesus as Lord, they recognized him, and they were not afraid to follow him. They were true followers who honored Jesus by their personal offering.

Today it is not just women founders who are important to the ministry of health care. We have women executives, board members and physicians. But the largest number of women in our health care ministries are nurses. They are very much like the Gospel woman, because in a real sense they anoint Jesus too as they anoint, honor and care

for their patients. They see Jesus in each one of them. Their ministry sometimes includes literal washing and anointing, as they clean bruised bodies or “anoint” them with healing oils, gels and topical medicines.

The crucial thing about the woman’s actions in today’s Gospel was, of course, not merely the washing or the anointing. It was the love that animated her in the first place. That is still true today. We can look at the enormous good done by the institutions that were founded 100 or 150 or 300 years ago. We can see the courageous and dedicated women who serve their patients today. But what is truly important is that they are motivated by love of God, a love that draws in all the poor, the sick and the needy that come to our doors.

The ministry of our nurses, at once professional, technical and tender, is deeply sacramental because they use relatively ordinary “tools of the trade” to make routine clinical encounters “occasions of grace.” These encounters, born of love and sustained by the Holy Spirit, are as powerful as the loving encounter between Jesus and the anonymous woman of the Gospel.