

Surviving Righteous Indignation

Mark 14:3-9

(Communion – August 3, 2008)

I would like to think that maybe I wouldn't have actually said anything to her face, but I have little doubt but that I would have been one of those who were critical of that woman that evening. Living in that time and place, everywhere one looked there were people in a state of serious malnourishment, homelessness and afflicted with grim, dehumanizing illnesses and all else that goes with chronic poverty. That being so, if you were a friend, a follower, an admirer of all Jesus had come to stand for and teach regarding caring, sharing and compassion, and if you were sitting at that table, how could you feel anything but incredulity and revulsion seeing that jar of perfume, worth more than an average annual wage, wastefully poured upon Jesus – Jesus of all people? It was unconscionable.

That's why those of us at the table that night, consumed with our own strong disapproval and criticism, thought we were only saying what Jesus had to be thinking just then. Even apart from the interruption and awkwardness, surely Jesus was thinking what we blurted out: "Lady, if you wanted to do something good, why didn't you sell the perfume and use the money to intercede in the desperate plights of those along the street who you certainly walked past on your way here? This is a shameful waste! What were you thinking?"

We were so certain that we were dead right that we were totally unprepared for Jesus reprimanding US, telling US to back off, saying in fact that this was a "beautiful thing" that the woman had done. He did say it, though, and even now it leaves one wondering, doesn't it? Where did we, the onlookers, the others at the table get it wrong? What did we miss? Again, why did WE get rebuked instead of his rebuking the woman, or his at least explaining to her that this intrusive, blatant, out-of-proportion extravagance just wasn't an appropriate gesture?

Surely it's safe to assume that Jesus hadn't temporarily forgotten about the poor, the starving, and the dying who were only yards away. Surely his point wasn't that the finest thing a person could nevertheless do would be, if he had the wherewithal, to douse someone with hundreds of shekels worth of perfume! No! That wasn't the message. All he, in effect, said was that in this instance, with this particular woman, and because of what this act represented for her, there was something profoundly beautiful – something far too sacred to be analyzed and criticized in terms of decorum, practicalities, and cost factors. While you and I were becoming inflamed with indignation, Jesus somehow managed to be in touch with the fact that what she did that evening came from so deep within her that for anyone to second-guess it, was a sacrilege. And right there we begin to get to the core of it.

Recognizing what is sacred, what is most deeply felt, and what inexplicably is rooted in the very soul of another person is a terribly important-but-elusive grace. The common assumption that blocks it is that by now you and I have lived long enough to know what really is meaningful and what really isn't, what makes good sense and what doesn't, what is suitable and what is inappropriate, what is soul-size and what is merely maudlin emotionalism.

When then I perceive that someone's reaction or response or sentiments is bizarre or seems impulsive or is imprudent or is incoherent to me or is out of proportion, I know what's true of it, don't you? He's losing it. Someone needs to straighten her out. He's become a problem. Really, the best thing is to ignore her -- isolate her. Had there been no one present that night with a Jesus-like sensitivity and empathy that woman would certainly have slinked off, thoroughly mortified, humiliated, devastated and demoralized. She certainly would not soon risk giving, reaching out, being self-disclosing or vulnerable again.

Obviously this isn't something that is at stake all of the time with everyone, but it is so far more than is usually noticed. It is a common, rough-shod discounting and trampling upon fragile feelings, deep needs, subtle sources of self-esteem, unique gifts, untypical values, vulnerabilities, concerns, and still more, dismissing them out of hand because, seen through the filters of our sophistication, they are odd or trivial or insignificant.

There's an old African legend that touches upon this. It seems that a certain tribe's cows stopped giving their customary supply of milk. The best guess of the tribesmen was that the milk was being stolen. So the tribal chieftain hid near the herd one night and kept watch. At midnight he saw a beautiful maiden descend on a moonbeam with two buckets. She quickly milked several of the cows and then ascended the moonbeam again.

So the next night he laid a trap for her and captured her. He asked her why she was stealing the tribe's milk. She replied that she was a princess from another realm where because of a famine her people were starving. She stole the milk to keep her people alive. The chieftain was enthralled with her grace and beauty and said that he would only release her if she would agree to become his wife. She agreed. She promised to be his wife if she could first go home to her own realm for a few days. She did so, and then after three days she came back with a closed box instead of her usual milk buckets. She told him that now she would be his wife, but that she would leave him if he ever opened his box that she had brought back with her. He assured her that he would not. Then they were married.

Sometime later when she was away, curiosity overcame the chieftain. He located the box, loosened the seal and opened it. When she returned she discovered what he had done. He tried to shrug it off, pointing out that the box was completely empty. There was absolutely nothing in

it when he opened it. But she said, “I know that it must seem so to you. But the box contained the air, the atmosphere, the scent of the realm from which I come and which has been my home. It was sacred to me.” So saying, she left him, never to return.

So where did the chieftain mess up? He lost her not merely for breaking a promise. It was in his refusing to take seriously the fact that there might be something sacred to her –something profoundly woven into her spirit that he should have accepted as sacred but had not. No, as frequently happens even in close relationships, he analyzed, evaluated, and decreed the irrelevance of that which he should have lovingly respected and taken seriously because, though beyond him, it was sacred to her. Again, it’s a clumsiness that can wreak surprising havoc between us and among us. And I hope it is clear that this isn’t about gritting one’s teeth and doing our best to FAKE some tolerance or indulgence while still never questioning our opinion that it’s no more than someone’s emotional excess or obsessiveness.

Jesus did not, you’ll note, sidle over and whisper to the others at the table that they should try to “ease up” since the lady is obviously unstable and fragile. Until we can get hr out of here, we need to humor her no matter how stupid she behaves. No! What this is about is taking completely seriously -- taking it on faith – that there can be hallowed areas and dimensions of love, of aspiration, of vision, of concern ingrained in another’s life and experience that, though it may be impossible ever to adequately interpret or explain, are nonetheless sacred.

A whimsical feeling for this appears in one of Joseph Heller’s books in which the format is that of King David on his death bed and writing his autobiography. As Heller imagines it, King David’s second wife, Bathsheba, has become interested in writing and has just written her first Psalm (which happens to be our 23rd Psalm). David now recalls how merciless he was in his ridicule and derision of what she showed him.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” I scoffed when she showed me her first effort. “That’s nonsense, Bathsheba -- pure nonsense. Where is your sense of metaphor? You’re turning God into a laborer and your audience into animals – into sheep. That’s practically blasphemy.” And “Shall not want -- WHAT? You’re raising questions instead of answering them . . . And HE maketh NO ONE to lie down in green pastures either. Where did you get a grotesque idea like that?” Bathsheba then protested, “Didn’t you ever sleep outdoors?” I replied, “Only when I had to. And I felt no kindness to the people who made me do it. Bathsheba, we’re not sheep. That’s what’s wrong with the whole concept -- just give it up, Bathsheba. Give it up! Go back to doing macramé.”

I can almost see Bathsheba retrieving her manuscript and visibly withering under the cold, bloodless sensibleness of her husband. “C’mon Bathsheba. We’re not sheep. God’s not a

sheep farmer. An overflowing cup is wasteful. No one wants his head anointed with oil. Still waters breed mosquitoes. Why would anyone in his right mind prepare a table in the presence of his enemies?” Do you see? It isn’t that difficult to stifle the spirit of someone who is in the vulnerable stages of coming to life. And “How,” one could ask, do intelligent, perceptive, even often sensitive people drift into the level of sheer clumsiness that surfaced in reaction to that woman at that table that night.

I’ve already hinted at one piece of it. It comes with feeling so knowledgeable, so practiced, so discriminating in matters of human nature that there isn’t any reasonable doubt whether someone’s experience or concern or remembrance or offering could be of any kind of importance or not, any question as to whether whatever it is makes any useful sense or not, whether it isn’t okay to just dismiss what appears to be his eccentricity. Moreover, once I am confident that I am unilaterally competent to make that judgment, I’m well on my way to being a bull running loose in the human china shop.

Another common source of my permission to discount any complicated sensitivities and sensibilities of another, is under the belief that there is (as we all of course agree, don’t we) a “norm” at which mature, reasonable, intelligent, emotionally healthy people arrive in their emotions, their sentiments and their temperaments. So when someone – like that woman -- barges into a room where a group of men are having dinner, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and pours a small fortune worth of perfume on one of the guests, no matter what any “bleeding heart” says, it is NOT a “beautiful thing” or “good” as Jesus called it. It’s an aberration. She needs to be controlled, not understood or abetted.

Yet something else that may have been a source of this chorus of revulsion of those men that night may have been what is all too often a generic discomfort – almost allergic reaction –some have in the presence of any real passion, any fervency, of any strong emotionality. As you may have noticed, the “passion impaired” persons gets very nervous, becomes openly irritated and even gets panicky in the presence of strong feelings. They will go on the attack, claiming that it’s immaturity, instability, and tastelessness that they’re reacting to.

But enough! The point is that what happened with Jesus and his acquaintances at dinner that night 20 centuries ago is worth reflecting upon. Maybe we can and should locate ourselves in some part of the story. Some of us might identify with that woman who for profoundly personal reasons – maybe out of gratitude or possibly out of repentance or conceivably having to do with something else – reached a point where she had to do as she did or something inside of her would die.

Probably some of us understand her critics better than we wish we did, and need to think that through, and I hope that there are some who have discovered and who know what it is to be Jesus Christ to someone at a juncture like that. It is a capacity of ours – a miracle, actually – that with God's help and some presence of mind, is within the reach of being performed by every one of us.