

Daily Lenten Devotional
Monday, April 14, 2025
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41—In Memory of Her; In Remembrance of Me



And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Mark 14.3-9

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'

Luke 22.14-20

She has done a beautiful thing (kalos) to me.

Art, when it is sublime, causes trouble, upsets people, is something for which people take offence. Art, when it illumines what is transcendent or what is grotesque, we see life in its mystery and its unbounded possibility.

When Jesus stifled the dissent about the act of anointing where the nard was wasted, he says, "Leave her alone; why do you trouble her. She has done a "beautiful thing to me." What the woman at Bethany did caused the sublime to be conjured and with the presence of the sublime the sense of control and order and definition of life to which we all cling to, this order was upset.

Kalos in Greek means 1. "beautiful in outward appearance . . . 2. Of quality, in accordance with the purpose of something. Or someone: good useful. a. free from defects, fine, precious . . . b. morally good, noble, praiseworthy, contributing to salvation . . . c. blameless, excellent.

One could say of the woman at Bethany that she did a useful thing; we could say she did a good thing; we could even say she did a noble or excellent thing. Yet, if we believe that beauty illumines memory, and in the memory illumined by beauty we see the truth, we find the power of the good, we are redeemed and restored, if we believe this, it is much more appropriate if we say she did a "beautiful" thing.

Most importantly though what caused Jesus to make his last and very audacious claim was not goodness or excellence or usefulness. What caused Jesus to say wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world it will be done in memory of her, what caused him to say this was the beauty. Usefulness and goodness does not have the power of beauty to conjure and illumine memory, but beauty does.

Although crosses made of gold must be the most absurd misunderstanding of scripture, it is not tragic. Unfortunate, yes. Devastating? No. The most tragic and devastating misunderstanding of scripture has to be the meaning and beauty of the Last Supper. No rite or ritual, no moment of worship or prayer offered in sacramental intent can reach the power and the misfortune of the words of the Institution.

The words of the Institution are taken from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. In the 11th chapter he writes,

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Of interesting to note, this is the only time the Apostle Paul offers the words of Jesus. In all of his letters, there are no teachings of Jesus, no parables, no mention of his miracles or healings,

just this. Of note is the change from Luke Gospel. Paul emphasizes the role of memory for both the bread and the cup.

In the centuries of the church, this teaching, this doctrine, the Eucharist, has caused the most bloodshed. It is a tragic irony that Jesus offering his blood to us would lead us to take the blood of others in violence. For a century Catholic and Protest waged war as to how Jesus was in the bread and in the cup. Was the bread changed in physical substance or essential substance? Are we to offer this bread and this cup to those who believe in Rome or in the Priesthood of All Believers? Who is worthy to speak the Institution? How is one worthy to receive it. Terrible question after terrible question left countless dead, many suffering the cruelest of fate in torture; terrible question after terrible question left Christendom splintered and even now unable to gather as one.

What never seemed to be asked, what was left aside for the desire to control and determine the power of the sacrament, what was left aside was memory. "Do this in remembrance of me." If we look to the example of the woman at Bethany, what she did, we can recast the words of Jesus this way, "do a beautiful thing in remembrance of me." If only we had looked to beauty instead of power and authority, if only we had remembered her, perhaps our preaching would have not been so tragic, been so prone to violence. What the woman at Bethany did was prepare the body of Jesus for burial after the violence of power and fear crucified him. Our sacrament of the Eucharist has done the opposite; in our failure to do what is beautiful we have hastened the violence and even brought it upon ourselves and upon one another.

Beauty is rarely used as a theological lens. This is not how we seek to look at God, or how we seek to understand how God looks at us. The lens of Bethany though should not be forgotten. It should be remembered. And, most importantly, the light of beauty should be the definition of the sacred, and thus, the sacrament. To make something beautiful is without question the greatest definition of baptism, to be seen as a beloved, "this is my son!" And the five sacraments discarded by the protestants, they too can be recast in terms of beauty.

Unction: to be anointed with oil and thus healed, made whole, restored to beauty.

Penance: to be forgiven and thus restored as a beloved, one who is now desired.

Confirmation: to know what is good and true and beautiful.

Marriage: to find the beauty of friendship.

Ordination: to dedicate one's self to beauty.

Consider the monument, the memorial, the museum as simply an act of beauty seeking the sublime. When such a site, space, statue, marker, symbol, image, when such as these achieve what is sublime, when they are beautiful the debt of memory is paid. Gratitude heals the tragic; honor transfers value from one generation to another; penance restores the beauty of life.

Consider the waterfall abyss at the Freedom Plaza. Is not the falling water meant to conjure memory for healing while at the same time acknowledge the unhealed, the yet broken? Is not the beauty there found both in the unbounded splendor and symmetry as well as it is found in

the grotesque, in the chaos, the unknowable? When Jesus, on the night of his arrest, takes the bread and said, “my body broken” and then says of the cup, “my blood poured out” is this not too a supreme act of love and courage as well as a horrific prediction of the grotesque? The sublime conjured by beauty is somehow in both; the mystery is in the presence of both.

How Jesus is substantially in the bread or the cup is a tragic and terrible question. A bad tree with bad fruit. How do we create beauty done in memory of Jesus, in the fashion of the woman at Bethany? How is what we make sacred an act of beauty to illumine our memory? A good tree bearing good fruit. Do this in remembrance of me. She did a beautiful thing. Preach in memory of her.