

April 7, 2019

TEXT: [John 12:1–8](#)

TITLE: Faith + Devotion

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

What is love? According to songwriters, love is a many splendored thing. Love is what makes the world go round. According to the popular saying, love is blind; but if you look at that phrase more closely, it doesn't feel quite right. Hate is blind. Cynicism is blind. Theologian Eugene Peterson has argued that love isn't blind. Love opens our eyes. Love lets you see what had been overlooked. Love corrects astigmatism so that what was distorted by selfishness or fear is now seen accurately and appreciatively. Love cures shortsightedness so that the blur of the distant other is now seen in wondrous focus. And love cures farsightedness so that opportunities for intimacy are no longer blurred threats but now blessed invitations near at hand.¹

Something about love and devotion changes us. And when it is true love, life-giving devotion, it changes us for the better. So, can you be a person of faith and not love? During Lent, we've been talking about things that are added to faith in order to make our faith deeper, richer, more vibrant: Faith + meditation and quiet prayer. Faith + a heart for justice. Faith + Free Will, the ability to move, dance, and choose what is good in this life we've been given by God. Today we look at one more pairing: Faith + Devotion and consider how being a person of faith invariably involves being a person of loving devotion.

Our guide for this conversation is the woman who knelt at Jesus' feet, anointing them with expensive perfume and drying them with her hair. This event is described in all four gospels and you can almost see how the story developed over time. In the earliest gospels, Mark and Matthew, it is an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' head while he is at meal at someone's house in Bethany. In Luke, it is an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' feet while he is at meal at the home of Simon the Pharisee. But the last gospel to be written, the gospel of John, takes the earlier detail of the event happening in Bethany and places the encounter in the home of Lazarus (who lived in Bethany and had just been raised from the dead); and further assigns this act of devotion to Lazarus' sister Mary. In the earlier stories, unnamed people fuss and complain about this waste of expensive ointment that could have been sold to help the poor. In John's version, moneybags Judas is the one who complains; thus setting up a stark contrast between two disciples—Mary with her devotion vs. Judas with his self-serving indignation.

Now we've been taught to associate Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, with all things bad. But recognize that Judas' question wasn't wrong. The perfume poured out, even wasted on anointing Jesus, was worth a year's salary. It certainly could have been sold and the money given to help the poor and needy. A lot could have been done with those funds. A lot can be done today if we rode our bikes more or took the bus to work instead of driving cars. A lot can be done if we had two meat-free dinners a week, if we wasted 10% less water a day, if we stopped using plastic grocery bags or wasting so much

food. All of that is true, including Judas' comment about selling the perfume and giving the proceeds to the poor.

But you know the old phrase: "It's not what you say but how you say it." Even when words are right, they can be communicated all wrong. There are times when you need to raise your voice and speak up, even shout out, in defense of what is right and just and necessary. But on that day, Judas' words were meant to demean and denigrate. He offered only roadblock rhetoric, impeding what was right. He lacked devotion, and so despite his moral correctness, he lacked faith.

Before Judas interjected himself into the scene, there's a marvelous one-verse description of this event. *Vs. 3: Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* Imagine that—a small house with people milling around, talking, cooking, finding dinner utensils; and overriding all the other senses – the sense of hearing conversations, of seeing faces, of feeling the touch of handshakes and embraces—comes this amazing sense of smell. The fragrance of perfume invisibly moves from one act of devotion involving Mary anointing Jesus' feet and expands out to infuse the entire house. It couldn't be hid. Everyone smelled it, noticed it, and at some point was connected to it. It was a blessing that moved outward until it touched everyone there. That's how you recognize when something is loving—when what is done moves outward to bless others extravagantly, freely, without counting the cost—like a perfume's aroma filling the very air you breathe.

So what are you devoted to? What brings you joy? Some people are devoted to painting, to making music, gardening, cooking, or just plain eating. I visited one of our shut-in church members a couple days ago. She can't move around very well and as a diabetic she has to be careful about her diet. But she loves to eat and has a real sweet tooth. So at some point we started talking about food. I'd try to talk about the church; she wanted to talk about chocolate. So we talked about favorite meals and family gatherings at dining room tables. We talked about chicken and ham and fish. Then the little minister-demon that stands on my shoulder and prods me to be a better pastor and talk about Jesus more—he poked me with his pitchfork and had me turn our talk about fish into a brilliant mini-sermon on how Jesus' first disciples were fishermen, and how one day he fed the crowd with a few loaves of bread and fish, and after he was raised from the dead on Easter, he appeared by the seashore and shared a meal of fish with his disciples. Isn't that good news? Darned if the next thing she said to me was: "You know what I like about Easter? Jelly beans." So we talked about jelly beans, and laughed a bit, and prayed a bit. I'm pretty sure the value of that visit had little to do with what I said but a lot to do with something else—call it love, call it devotion, call it a mutual friendship and oneness in Christ—it was something that filled that nursing home room like a fragrant perfume.

Malcolm Muggeridge's biography of Mother Teresa is called "Something Beautiful for God." If what we believe about God in Christ doesn't move us into something beautiful, something devoted and giving and extravagant, then something critical is missing from

our faith. The apostle Paul knew this to be true. Remember the famous verses that open I Corinthians 13: *If I speak in the tongues of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. If I have able to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all I possess and hand over my body that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.* (I Corinthians 13:1–3)

Judas was right in noting that the poor could have been well-served by the proceeds raised from selling Mary's perfume—but he wasn't righteous or loving in his remark. In that moment, Judas' words rang hollow while Mary's loving, extravagant act filled every single space with a fragrance that would be remembered forever. And don't forget this detail: In just a few days, Jesus would gather again for a meal with his disciples—a literal last supper before being arrested and crucified. At that meal, Jesus would kneel before his friends and lovingly wash their feet. Then he would say to them, *As I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you.* (John 13:14–15) Jesus didn't give them a book to read. He didn't give them a checklist of good deeds to accomplish, of legislation to pass, of enemies to denounce or sermons to preach. He filled that room with the sound of water poured over their feet. He energized their senses with the feel of a towel carefully drawing away the moisture. And he seared upon their memories that simple act of devoted, active faith, which was just like a rich perfume had pervaded every corner of a house in Bethany a few days earlier.

Showing devotion to someone else is how we best learn who we are. And life is too short—the world is too big—for us to spend our days only in doing what is right, what is expected, what is narrowly defined as correct and good and pious. Sometimes you need to talk about jelly beans. Sometimes you need to slow down and wash feet, lend a hand, or break out the expensive perfume and let its aroma fill the house. True faith and true love demand expression. They cannot be silent, nor modestly restrained all the time. Remember Faith + Devotion. Remember Mary and do something beautiful for God.

¹ Eugene Peterson, Where Your Treasure Is, p. 171.