

Isaiah 43: 16-21
Philippians 2: 12-18
John 12: 1-11

A Prophet with Perfume
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On the United Church of Christ website, on a page with the heading “What We Believe”, there are 11 testimonies of faith starting with “We believe.” The tenth one is “We believe that the UCC is called to be a prophetic church. As in the tradition of the prophets and apostles, God calls the church to speak truth to power, liberate the oppressed, care for the poor and comfort the afflicted.”

“The tradition of the prophets” – what could that mean? We usually think of the prophets as Old Testament characters (or caricatures) shouting about how bad everything is going to be if we don’t watch out. But, aside from that simplistic impression, what is a prophet exactly? Muslims believe prophets have been sent by God to every people on earth, bringing God’s message in a language that particular people can understand. In our own faith, the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to (*that*) of the dominant culture around us.” And, he says, “Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us.”

When the prophet Isaiah spoke the words read earlier by Gunnar, he said, in God’s voice, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” A prophet surprises us with new things that God is about to do. This can look weird, or feel awkward, or just plain crazy. It’s new, it’s unsettling. When we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry, we get the feeling that people are struck with the strangeness of his behavior. Since it is unfamiliar, it feels wrong. He definitely “evoked an alternative consciousness to that of the dominant culture.” And was criticized, persecuted, and killed for it. That’s also in the tradition of the prophets.

Our Gospel reading today, from the 12th chapter of John’s Gospel, should be read with the 11th chapter in mind. The 11th chapter is when Jesus decides to approach Jerusalem, though he knows it is dangerous, to visit some friends in the suburb town of Bethany. The friends are Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Lazarus was sick, and he died before Jesus could get there. The two sisters confronted him with their grief. Jesus, with prophetic power, penetrated the despair of the family, and called Lazarus from the tomb, restoring him to life. This was called a “sign,” a metaphorical action with a deeper meaning than a mere miracle. Jesus challenged even death to give way before the possibility of a new future.

Then he retreats to the safety of another town for a while, until the festival of the Passover, and his destiny, call him back to the environs of Jerusalem. This is where our scene opens: with a dinner party with his best friends, people so profoundly grateful to him that words cannot express their feelings. So, of course they give him dinner.

Part of good hospitality was foot-washing. Especially at a formal meal, when guests arrived after walking the dusty and dirty streets, but you could not hide your feet under a table, because you

were reclining, a servant or slave would wash their feet. At first glance, Mary's gesture with the expensive perfume seems like an exaggerated expression of this kind of hospitality. Rather than letting the slaves do their job, she takes it on. She singles out this one guest. Rather than simply washing, she anoints with a very expensive ointment. Then she does something really bizarre: she wipes his feet with her hair instead of a towel. That's a new thing springing forth, all right! This to me is a hint that Mary is in prophetic mode. She is making everyone uncomfortable with her "alternative" behavior. It looks weird, it feels awkward, and is just plain crazy. There is more going on here than hospitality to a guest.

Remember that Mary and her sister Martha have been through a traumatic time, a sort of emotional roller coaster. Martha, as is her custom, apparently, sublimates her feelings through cooking. I totally get that. It is probably what I would do. But Mary transmutes her emotions into another activity. She has, it seems, a jar of nard. Maybe it was left over from the burial of her brother, who is now sitting at the table. It was of enormous monetary value, but even greater emotional value. Her brother was alive! Her friend, she feared, was headed for death.

Anointing is such an interesting, *loaded* action. Any act of anointing affirms something about the person being anointed. Anointing for healing acknowledges a person's suffering and affirms God's power and compassion. Anointing the head at a coronation ritually affirms the status of a monarch. Anointing with certain spices affirms the value of a person being prepared for burial. And, let's not forget that the title often given to Jesus – the Messiah, the Christ – means the Anointed One.

Mary's prophetic action with this perfume is loaded with meaning, shocking as it is. Feet, in Hebrew culture symbolized the body's taking action, the body's intention. When the perfume jar is opened and Mary begins to rub it into Jesus' feet, in a way she is commissioning him for the path ahead, affirming (probably with great sorrow) his intention to spend the Passover in dangerous Jerusalem. Perhaps, in a way, it is also a healing anointing, acknowledging Jesus' own trepidation and stress as he takes this road. In his words to Judas, Jesus calls attention to the third loaded meaning: "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

I have read that, in those days, when bodies were anointed before burial, one always started with the extremities – the hands and feet – before moving on to the rest of the body. There is a deep symbolism in this. The hands and the feet are where we meet the world, touch the world, walk in the world. They are also the places where the first cold signs of death appear. Mary is in anticipatory grief mode. Every sign of love and honor is concentrated in this one act: hospitality, reverence, affirmation, pity, compassion, and tenderness. She speaks to the others in the room in a particular language with her prophetic critique of the culture around her. She speaks to them with her prophetic anointing to "penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced."

We know that she is up against the dominant culture when Judas Iscariot speaks up. Her extravagant, wasteful actions are criticized with a practical alternative: we should have sold this precious nard so that we would have some money to give to the poor. Now, that sounds a lot less crazy than what Mary is doing (though the narrator makes the point that Judas was dishonest and the poor would never have seen that money anyway). Surprisingly, Jesus does not seem to go along with this charitable sentiment. "Leave her alone!" he says. She knows my burial is drawing nearer. You will still have lots of poor to care for after that. But you will not have me sitting here to care for.

For many people, these are some of the most troubling words in the Gospel, especially when read out of context. I remember being about 10 years old, sitting in the back of a car with a couple of church ladies in the front seat, listening as they spoke about the terrible sufferings and shortcomings of poor people. I think that they were referring to the African American people who lived in Peekskill, NY. Then one of them ended the conversation with, “Well, you know what the Bible says. The poor will always be with us.” As though that excused all their small-minded judgment and apathy. I remember sitting there, angry and roiling, thinking, “That *can't* be right.” I still read the Bible with that lens, remembering all the ways it is misused to comfort those who do not need comforting and afflict those who do not need one more affliction.

And so I have come to see Mary as a prophet in a long line of women who have resisted the demands of others to behave more quietly and normally, to stop being weird and making us feel awkward. Her action speaks louder than a trumpet to declare, “This man saved my brother from death. And now he is walking to his own death on behalf of all the grieving, downtrodden people of this world. He is a king. He is beloved. He is brave – his path will take him to the halls of tyranny and to the tomb of life as we know it. But he is the Anointed One, our Messiah of hope. He will penetrate our despair and give us a future.”

Walter Brueggemann says a lot of other things about prophets, which may help us to follow Mary and become a prophetic church. He says that the “task of the prophet is simultaneously to criticize and energize while working toward the formation of a new community.” A new community *was* formed after the cross and the tomb and the garden and Pentecost. Over the centuries, that community, with a lot of fits and starts and mis-steps, has given more money to the poor that could ever have been realized by that jar of ointment in Bethany. We have inherited citizenship in that community, and a charge to live out the prophetic dream. We have inherited the charge to hold in our hands both the precious life of Jesus, with reverence and tenderness – and the precious lives of all those who need healing and food and justice. We resist the notion of Judas that it is either/or.

The formation of a new community brings with it great spiritual power. It gives us the power to resist the notion of the dominant culture that some must suffer for others to thrive. It allows us to put our hands to work on the seemingly small and focused tasks of caring for one person at a time: one pair of feet to be washed, one person to be welcomed to dinner. It also allows us to put our voices and feet to work on the seemingly huge and insurmountable injustices of our world: the needs of refugees, the forces of war, the currents of privilege and discrimination running through our society.

God is about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? May God give us the insight and courage of Mary of Bethany, who spoke through the actions of her hands and her heart to show us the way. Amen.