

“Loving In Love By Love”:
Lessons on Love from Mary, Mahadeviyakka, and Marguerite
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March 25, 2007

May the one who speaks and those who listen together discern what in these words may be the word of God for us in this hour.

For our reflections, I would like for us to ponder this morning’s Gospel from the Book of John. Our reading is not an easy one for good, mainline Christians to digest. Our reading presents us with an extraordinary and lavish gesture of adoration. A woman, Mary of Bethany, sister of the resurrected Lazarus, pours a jar of expensive perfume, worth about 300 days salary on Jesus’ feet and then proceeds to wipe those feet with her hair. Mary pours out her heart in an act of tender ecstasy. Judas, however, is offended by this gesture of devotion and wishes that the money had been put to better use, namely for charity. Jesus rebukes Judas with what is surely one of his most cryptic sayings, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

For sober Episcopalians, this passage is problematic and doubly so. On the one hand, the excessive and uncalculated adoration displayed by Mary is a little embarrassing. This is just not the sort of thing that proper and respectable persons do. In Jesus’ time a woman who lets down her hair in public is violating social norms and is engaging in behavior that is inappropriate. And as for us, we are by and large not a community that spends much time talking about loving and adoring Jesus. Christian piety of that sort seems not just improper but intellectually problematic. We don’t quite know what it’s about. For many of us, loving Jesus is a task best left to the evangelicals. What

we get excited about are our trips to Ecuador, Mobile Loaves and Fishes, Room at the Inn, and the like. We tend to devote our time, energy and resources on behalf of the poor.

But when it comes to the question of the poor, our Gospel reading makes our lives difficult indeed. It would be quite natural to hear this passage as a critique of the progressive concerns of liberal mainline churches. “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” The passage invites contemporary Christians to draw out an analogy between Mary and Judas and segments of the contemporary church. Mary’s adoration maps onto evangelical and charismatic piety and Judas’s stated concern with poverty maps nicely onto the concerns of mainline denominations. Read in this way, the passage seems to imply that loving Jesus is more important and urgent than caring for the poor.

This dichotomy between devotion and service may be a bit simplistic, but there is no denying that the American church is at present a house divided. Evangelicals and fundamentalists, on the one hand, are entirely committed to loving Jesus. Popular Christian rock is nothing but a series of love songs to the Lord. Praise and adoration reign supreme. On the other hand, many in mainline churches are viscerally reactive to “Tiptoeing through the tulips with Jesus spirituality.” It seems so maudlin and so sentimental; hearing such music makes me want to say, “Please, people, get a room!”

I must confess that my allergy to syrupy Jesus love exceeds in strength my allergy to dust, cats, ragweed and pollen. I can find ways to cope with the latter allergies. Take some Zyrtec and Singulair, and I’m alright. But syrupy Jesus love, that gets under my skin and irritates me, and I just can’t seem to stop the itch. There is no medication for it; and, at least in Nashville, there is no avoiding it.

But what are we to make of Mary's devotion? Her love is so sensuous and so tactile, so bodily and so total that I find myself profoundly moved. There is an intensity, purity, and urgency to such love that I wonder if I am not poor indeed if I am incapable of such love. What might my life be like if I could love Jesus like Mary loved Jesus?

Ironically and perhaps strangely, I have found in my heart a new openness to loving Jesus after I had read devotional poetry from Hindu traditions. In those traditions, I found a different but equally radical and compelling intensity of love for God. Something about finding such consuming passion in a context other than my own allowed me to be open without allergy. Listen for example to the striking poetry of Mahadeviyakka, a 12th century female saint who was utterly and intensely in love with Lord Siva.

He bartered my heart,
looted my flesh,
claimed as tribute
my pleasure,
took over
all of me.
I'm the woman of love
for my lord, white as jasmine.
And here is another poem:
Other men are thorn
under the smooth leaf.
I cannot touch them,

go near them, nor trust them,
nor speak to them confidences.

Mother,

because they all have thorns
in their chests,

I cannot take
any man in my arms but my lord
white as jasmine.

And here is a third poem from Mahadeviyakka, my favorite,

I love the Handsome One:

he has no death

decay nor form

no place nor side

no end nor birthmarks.

I love him O mother. Listen.

I love the Beautiful One

with no bond nor fear

no clan no land

no landmarks

for his beauty.

So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.

Take these husbands who die,

decay, and feed them

to your kitchen fires.

Like Mary's love, Mahadeviyakka's love is total, reckless, and all-consuming. It gives not a whit for social norms and convention. Mahadeviyakka's love is very much like Mary's love, a love that forgets that pouring perfume on someone's feet and wiping those feet with your hair is just not the sort of thing that one does at proper dinner parties. There is nothing at all sober and restrained about the love these women experience. Both are examples of ecstatic, tactile and erotic adoration.

Mahadeviyakka's love for Siva has helped me to find my way back to loving Jesus. Her love for God reminded me that the Christian tradition is from beginning to end full of those who adore Jesus. Remember, for example, St. Augustine's famous saying, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." But Augustine is not alone: Bonaventure, St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and many, many others have been holy lovers of God wholly possessed by adoration for the Jesus who brings us new life.

And that, of course, is the source of Mary's love. The Jesus whom we meet in the Gospel of John is the power of Life itself. He is the one who brings healing and resurrection. He is the One who is living water. He is the one who raised Mary's brother Lazarus, and He is the One who heals and raises us up to new and abundant life. He is Love come down from heaven and made flesh. We love Jesus because we confess that in this lowly carpenter, we have witnessed the true meaning and nature of love itself.

What does such love look like? Love is a Jewish body that embraces the bodies of the broken-hearted and the despised. Love is to be found in the rough and calloused hand of a carpenter who lifts up the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the alien. Love is a

Jewish body that embraces without hesitation the bodies of lepers and the unclean. Love is a body that walks the length and breadth of an occupied and brutalized land and tells those who are oppressed and disinherited that they are a people of dignity and infinite worth. Love is a courageous and compassionate voice that teaches the oppressed that they must neither fear nor loathe their oppressors. Love hangs on the cross and forgives those who crucify him.

We adore Jesus because we too have found God's love made flesh in him. In him, we hear the voice of one who tells us that we have been loved into being by the creator of heaven and earth. From him, we have heard that God is a like a father who longs for the return of his beloved son while that son remains lost in a far country struggling to come to his senses. When we love Jesus, we declare our love for Love itself. To love Jesus is to fall in love with love, to be enraptured and captivated by one calls us to die to our fears, die to our egos, die to our narrow self-seeking and to be born to a new life of joy, courage and service.

Ultimately, the great lovers of Jesus in Christian tradition teach us that the love with which we love Jesus is itself the love of God in us. The love that Jesus awakens in our hearts is not just our own; it is rather God's love in us. The love that Jesus awakens in us is nothing less than God's love digging down deep into the stony and hard places in our soul until out from the depths there erupts a wellspring of living water that will be for us healing and a source of blessing for others. The Christian term for such love is Holy Spirit for it is the Holy Spirit in us that empowers us to love others.

The famous Christian mystic Marguerite Porete has perhaps captured this dynamic best. In the soul's movement into God, she writes, "Now there is one common

will, as fire and flame, as the will of the Lover and the one who is loved, for Love has transformed this Soul into Love herself. Ah! Very sweet Pure Divine Love says this Soul, how it is a sweet transformation by which I am transformed into the thing which I love better than myself! And I am so transformed that I have lost my name in it for the sake of Love, I who am able to love so little. However little I can love, it is in love, for I do not love except by love.”

So, today, I want to love Jesus. I want to love the one who gave his life for the poor. I want to love Jesus because he embraced the rejected, the despised, the lost and the diseased, and in so doing, embraced me. I want to love him because I know that if my love should become deep and true, my love for Jesus will be his love in me. I want to love him not just because I want to be like Jesus, but because I want to be made over into Love no matter what the cost.

But how are we to love Jesus? After all, we are no longer able to pour out perfume on his feet. And, as for me, my hair wouldn't go very far. Here, we would do well to remember the final conversation between Peter and Jesus that ends the Gospel of John.:

Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’¹⁶ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’¹⁷ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to

him, 'Feed my sheep.' ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Jesus teaches Peter and in turn teaches us that to love Jesus is to feed and tend his sheep. To love Jesus is by no means a matter of mere sentimental piety. It is a matter of deeds not words. To love Jesus is to care for those whom Jesus loved: the poor, the broken-hearted, the oppressed and the marginalized. To love Jesus is to care for ordinary and needy bodies in tangible ways. If we are to love Jesus, like Peter, we must also stand prepared to be "taken where we do not wish to go." To love Jesus means that we must stand prepared to have our bodies broken if that's what it takes to insure that the bodies of others can be brought into wholeness and healing. Sometimes loving Jesus even means forgetting Jesus and remembering the suffering neighbor who stands before us in her hour of need. To love Jesus is to participate in the Eucharist knowing full well that by coming to the table we are praying for the strength to love God's beloved creation with the same recklessness and fearlessness that Jesus loved.

There is then finally no dichotomy between loving Jesus and loving the poor who are the beloved of Jesus. No confession of love for Jesus is meaningful if it is severed from feeding and tending his sheep. As it was with Mary of Bethany, so it is with us: Loving Jesus is something that we must do with our bodies for the bodies of those who stand in need.