

Anointing for Healing

Mark 14:3-9 by Patty Friesen (March 29/15)

Bertha Beachy, a Mennonite Central Committee worker in Somalia was invited to a “madax shub,” a women’s circle to pray for healing for a friend with a blood clot. One by one, the women arrived at the house, gracefully sliding out of their slippers as they stepped on the woven rugs. Some came in brightly coloured dresses with matching head scarves. Others came in the one colour burkas that covered them from head to ankle. All the women promptly discarded their scarves and burkas once inside, as there were no men around. They ate delicious rice with chili sauce, browned goat meat, sweet camel milk and finished with fruit and spicy tea. Having eaten, they turned to the anointing ceremony.

Aisha, the host brought in a small bowl of warm oil and put some on each of the women’s heads who were gathered in the circle. Incense filled the room and the burner was passed from person to person. They began with the traditional prayers, In the name of God the Merciful and Compassionate One. They prayed for healing for their friend with the blood clot and for peace in Somalia. The group responded with Amen at appropriate moments. Then Bertha was asked to pray. Afterward, several of the women commented with surprise that Christians pray for healing like Muslims do.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus is in Bethany, at the home of a man known as Simon the Leper. Is this Simon the leper from Jesus’ healing in Mark 1? This would be a neat circle of healing. An unnamed woman came to Jesus with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. It is a dramatic action in an already dramatic week for Jesus beginning with the

palm procession into Jerusalem. It is the beginning of the end for Jesus and he knows it. You don't ride into Jerusalem on the highest of holy days with crowds cheering you on while the religious authorities plot and the Romans watch and expect to get out of this alive. The palm branches are a symbol of royal welcome. Jesus is welcomed as the king of the Jews into the Jewish royal city on the Jewish highest holy day. But Jesus knows the irony of the situation. The crowd's shouts of Hosanna will soon turn to shouts of Crucify him. He chooses to emphasize the irony by riding in on a donkey instead of a white stallion. Then he goes to the royal inaugural feast but it is not with politicians. It is with Simon the Leper. He is the king of lepers. Then in the tradition of the anointing of the Jewish kings, Saul and David, he too is anointed but not by a priest or prophet but by an unnamed woman who in her boldness of approach and expensive gift is believed to be a prostitute. She anoints him not for kingship but for death.

These scenes are dripping with irony as Jesus' hair is dripping with perfume and while those present exclaim indignantly, "why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." But Jesus shakes the perfume from his hair and laughs, "leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you and you can help them anytime you want. But you will not always have me." Again the irony, for Jesus knows they are not really concerned about the poor, nor are they really concerned about him.

Verse 8, Jesus says, "She has done what she could." I think this would make a good epitaph on my tombstone. She did what she could and now she's done! That pretty much sums up a life, doesn't it? Verse 8 continues: "She has anointed my body beforehand for my burial." Her anointing Jesus' body narratively prepares us for Jesus'

body as the new symbolic center for the disciples – both in the resurrection of Jesus’ body and in the practice of the Lord’s supper which we will participate in this Maundy Thursday– this is my body broken for you – do this in remembrance of me. And in remembrance of this anointing Jesus said, Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” Jesus’ anointing by a woman for burial begins the last days of his’ life that will end with more women coming to the tomb to anoint his body. Women and anointing form a circle around Jesus and his crucifixion. As Jesus was surrounded and upheld in love and prayer, so we all need healing circles of friends and family and church.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer observed in his African hospitals that patients recovered more quickly when their whole family came to hospital to cook and care for them. Hospitals look to faith communities to be healing circles of prayer and support for folks before and after their surgeries. As churches we are only beginning to claim our ministries of healing as the Physician’s assistants.

Dave and I will offer anointing with oil this morning. We may come down the two aisles and receive a bit of oil on our foreheads. In preparation...Let us pray together the prayer in the bulletin...O God, we come to you at this moment because you love us. You know us more deeply than we know ourselves. You desire wholeness for each of your children, broken though we are in body, mind, and spirit. As we come before you, we pray for healing in each of our lives.

After anointing: May God, who is almighty and merciful, forgive our sins, heal our diseases and bring us to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.