

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## CONTEMPLATION

**The Rev. Andrew F. Kline**

Text of a Sermon preached the Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 3, 2022

ISAIAH 43:16-21 | PSALM 126

PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14 | JOHN 12:1-8

Mary does something beautiful for God. She has been considering it for some time. She has never met anyone like Jesus. Although he seems to know everything she has thought, said or done, he does not judge her. He does not hold her mistakes or her position in life against her. He sees her. Values her. Listens to her.

There was this moment, when they looked at each other and realized that the most precious gift in the whole world is this gaze, this beholding. There are poets, philosophers and mystics who have tried to describe it: a mutual admiration between souls that understand each other, that anticipate each other's thoughts and needs, between

souls that can find another depth of giving, just as they freely receive. Who discover at the same time that they need nothing from each other than one another's presence. It was the moment they called each other friends.

Jesus is, at last, finally, among friends. Safe it would seem, if just for an evening. What could have been crazier than the last few weeks, as Passover neared, when brother Lazarus fell ill and died. At that moment, Jesus was not there. Was he coming? No! He came late! He came with all those storm clouds over his head, not wanting to draw attention. It seemed like everyone was furious with him and glad to see him at the same time.

Better late than never. Against all hope, Lazarus is alive. Everyone stares at him. He doesn't say a word as he sits there next to Jesus. Martha, Mary, Lazarus and the disciples gather around the family table hoping for a simple quiet meal. Something has changed though. Have there not been enough miracles? Fear is in the air. A stale taste in the mouth meets the weariness in their bones. So many words said behind closed doors and in back alleys. There is a plot to kill Jesus. And suddenly, a plot to kill Lazarus. They are going to enter the city through the eastern gate tomorrow for the celebration of the Passover. No one dares hold too long the other's gaze. The silence is deafening.

Mary has been thinking that they need to focus on him - not for what he can do for them - not for what he can do for the nation - but just on him and the burden he carries. Is there some way to lighten the load, to dispel the approaching darkness, to see clearly what he faces ahead? She had been thinking about this or some time. She had set aside a year's wages and purchased the ointment for burial. At first she thought she would need it for Lazarus. Then she realized they all needed it today.

Mary took the alabaster jar filled with the precious ointment. How do you describe something that can both sting and soothe, penetrate, relax and bring back alive strained and stretched skin. A healing balm. An invigorating elixir that most of all smells like heaven, that can change the atmosphere in the room, that can lift the soul from the dreariness and finality of this earth and to rest with the Holy One.

Mary took the alabaster jar filled with the precious ointment. She knew how much it cost but she did not care. She poured it on his feet

and slowly, tenderly, held them, kissed them, wiped them carefully, patiently, with her hair, until fresh and renewed, she felt the change in Jesus' heart. The fragrance, for just a minute, overwhelmed the room, and gave everyone a second chance to see what might need changing in their hearts.

It is well known that the spiritual discipline of prayer is not one thing, for instance, speaking our mind out loud to God. That is where most of us should start. But that is not where we should end. When the disciples asked Jesus, 'teach us to pray', he taught them the Our Father. But when he went up on the mountain alone, he also taught them the other forms of prayer. Mary, when she sat at Jesus feet, learned them too. Right there.

Deep and profound prayer can change our heart. But it must at least include the four forms of the great tradition, the four forms we find in the Holy Eucharist. First, there is the reading aloud of God's word. Second, the meditation on its meaning. Third, there is the verbal expression of all it brings to us including our intercessions and petitions.

But finally, there is this fourth movement, that we can neglect. It is the great gift of just sitting in the presence of Almighty God and contemplating all that he is and has done and has promised. It is that silence after the Holy Communion. It is Mary drawing near to wipe Jesus' feet.

The saints call this last gift of prayer contemplation. To draw near with faith, in total trust, to be in the presence of your best friend, your beloved kin, the neighbors who make up your community, and appreciate them. King David said: "One thing that I desire of the Lord. And that will I seek after. To behold the beauty of the Lord, and dwell in his temple."

Mary knew for some time that she had wanted to do this for Jesus. Little did she know how much she needed to do it for Jesus. And not just for him, not just to reveal the hearts around her, the fears and jealousies, the carelessness and self dealing of scared disciples and angry people in power. She did it for each succeeding generation who would dare to follow Jesus. She did it for us.

She did it to remind us that the poor we will always have with us, the poor we will always attend to, and that life and love are priceless. She did it so that when we open the door and see a stranger, a refugee, an immigrant, we would welcome them as a friend.

Mary did something beautiful for God. May we, as we contemplate his love for us and for the whole world, dare to do something beautiful for God, and for each other. Will you do that, my friend?

Behold the beauty of the Lord! Behold the wonder of each other! Freely, freely, you have received. Freely, freely give. Amen.