

Charles Ornstein, an NBC healthcare reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote an editorial telling the story of his mother dying suddenly. He had written extensively for years about how the healthcare system needs to stop prolonging life at any cost. He writes how it is useless for the system to keep hope going if there is no hope. This was until his mother, after excruciating headaches, went into the hospital and began to have horrible seizures. She suddenly lay there in a coma hanging onto life and was kept alive for three weeks while the doctors and nurses kept throwing every test and treatment they had at her, to no avail. Finally, they decided to let her go. He writes: "I've always thought that the high cost of end-of-life care is an issue worthy of discussion. About a quarter of Medicare payments are spent in the last year of life, according to recent estimates... Studies show that this care is often futile. It doesn't always prolong lives, and it doesn't always reflect what patients want. However, only until someone I loved who was dying did this perspective take on a different meaning." As the saying goes: "This time, it is personal." This love is personal.

Perhaps this event can guide us into this very challenging text today. Many readers of the Gospel of John for centuries have had questions, especially revolving around the actions of Mary wiping Jesus' feet with perfume and the response from Judas. Many of us, however, I think would agree with Judas! Why use *one pound* of expensive perfume, which would take an ordinary person 1 full year to afford, and wipe it on the feet of Jesus? This is not normal. In fact, it borders on crazy. What can possibly be the point of this act?

Maybe it was personal. Scholars continue to argue over the “erotic nature” of this text. Who knows if these assumptions are correct or not. But for me, I feel you can’t read this story without lifting an eyebrow at least slightly. For instance, in that society, women were often banned from having *any* interaction with any man beyond their husband. On top of that, Mary’s act of putting this huge amount of perfume on Jesus’ feet with her hair imbues the act with profound intimacy. Biblical scholar Matthew Skinner writes: “If the fragrance of her perfume fills the house, then the gentle touch of the locks of her hair certainly fill Jesus’ sensations. It is an expression of deep, personal love that those watching would hardly ignore or find ordinary.” Isn’t it interesting that when things get deep, when love gets so strong and so close, Mary’s actions go beyond the rules.

At least one person was disgusted by this event, and that was Judas. Now, I think Judas gets kind of a bad rap for obvious reasons. Yes, he can be seen as “the devil” and of course in John he is described literally as a thief. But, one of the most magnificent parts about this gospel is how John always creates characters (in a literary sense) that mean something beyond themselves. Judas is no different. Judas, we read, hangs out with the priestly class: the high profile Jewish rulers who have an idea or two about how to practice Judaism. In various other scenes, a reader, if they pay attention, may notice that Judas practices a much larger and deeper spiritual piety and discipline: a piety and discipline that has no stomach for the wild love of Mary. Blogger Bill Kinnin writes: “We must not automatically conflate discipline with discipleship.” But, our season of Lent is when we focus on discipline, isn’t it?

We hear, again, in Lent about our “giving up” something for the season and “disciplining” ourselves. In many ways, discipline is helpful to “go deeper”. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Society, the order the new pope comes from, wrote a famous book titled *Spiritual Exercises*. Followers of Ignatius would practice and practice over and over again these methods and disciplines in order to gain a deeper and grounded understanding of what it means to live a life of faith. But, for Judas, this discipline seemed to do the opposite. Instead of going deeper, it held him back. It isolated him from what was really going on.

During internship, I had the honor of touring an LGBT Community Center located about 10 blocks away from St Mark’s Lutheran Church, my internship congregation, in San Francisco. Though this center was focused on helping Gay, Lesbian, and transgendered people, it strove to be a gathering place for *everyone* in the neighborhood. The person who was giving me a tour of the building told me about the problem of bathrooms in San Francisco. Most agencies in the city don’t have public bathrooms that people from the street can come in and use, for several reasons. First off, if you open up a bathroom that means more effort in cleaning and maintaining the facility. If you open up bathrooms, it also opens up risks like safety for others in the building because you don’t know exactly what is happening in that bathroom at all times. Perhaps, those who use the bathroom for one reason or another can’t take care of themselves properly and leave behind a stench or a mess. So, because of these reasons, people on the street do not have access to bathrooms during the day.

But the LGBT Center not only offers their bathrooms and facilities to anyone who wants to use them, but they also installed handicapped bathrooms! Personal bathrooms that also have a

key so you can have a more private bathroom experience. On the surface, they have paid the price. In fact when I was there having a tour, they had to call maintenance frantically because the toilet in the men's bathroom was plugged and overflowing. And yet, the woman who was giving me the tour told stories about people coming in and simply asking to use the bathroom. She told me how simply "giving them the key" and giving them some privacy in their own bathroom gives them dignity back.

Mary shows how we, the church, are called in mission to an extravagant, outlandish love which sometimes requires us to go beyond the boundaries and calculated risks. Now I don't know about you, but there are many reasons why I don't chose to put myself out there: self consciousness, ego, fear of ridicule, public shame. I am sure that I am not alone in these reasons. Yet, as the church (a community in Christ), we walk together in personal ways: sometimes outlandishly. Now obviously, our context maybe doesn't require us to think about offering free bathrooms as much as in San Francisco. But, the challenge of living out personal, outlandish love is still present here. This is why we are interviewing both members of our congregation as well as in community. It is a way for us to ask: what are ways in which we might be able to love outlandishly?

This, my friends, is one of the challenges of this challenging text. How can we support each other so that our self-consciousness doesn't get in the way? How can we build each other up to think outside of the box? How can we radically "perfume others" as a community without being fearful of what others may think? Maybe this is our new discipline in discipleship. For as the body of Christ in proclaiming God's word, we are empowered to point to a personal love that

is within each and every one of us. This is what Mary reveals. This time it's personal. May Christ be with you as we create a new discipline and as we discern on how to love beyond the norm.

Amen.