

Anointing
John 12:1-19
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First Central Congregational UCC
13 April 2014

Palm Sunday is always a liturgically strange day. On the one hand there is much joy and celebration. The children parade down the aisle with the palms. We sing upbeat, triumphal music. This year spring flowers are just beginning to bloom.

While on the other hand, death hangs in the air. We know that before we get to all the fun of Easter, we must spend time with Good Friday.

This week, while reading an essay on healing by the Episcopal priest John Koenig, I encountered this statement:

When we are very ill, we are brought to the place where life and death meet. For Christians, this place is the cross. Yet in the central mystery of our faith, the cross is also a prelude to new life.

This story I've read today, about the meal in Bethany, is also one of those moments when death and life meet. And in this story, we are reminded of how when we come to those moments in our own lives we can bring healing for one another.

Lazarus has risen, and Martha and Mary want to celebrate. They throw a party, inviting Jesus and their friends to celebrate with them.

Mary takes this expensive perfume, which would have come all the way from India, and uses it to anoint the feet of Jesus. Then, quite scandalously, she takes her hair out of veil, and uses it to wipe his feet. It is an overwhelming act of gratitude, generosity, and love, that stuns those who witness it.

This is a story, then, of joy and celebration and life.

But death is in the air.

Death hangs over this story because no matter what else has happened, Lazarus was dead. For four days, this family experienced harrowing grief, and that kind of grief marks you.

Many of you are familiar with this. Even if you came out of the surgery okay. Even if you recovered from the stroke. Even if you survived the accident. Even if the cancer treatments worked and the disease is in remission. There were those harrowing days when you were face-to-face with grief and fear. Even when you are celebrating afterwards, those memories persist.

Death hangs in the air because Jesus and his friends are under threat. In last week's story the disciples warned Jesus not to go to Bethany, for they were afraid he would be captured and killed. After Jesus' raised Lazarus from the grave, the author informs us that the religious authorities are so angry that they begin to plan the death of Jesus, and in this story we learn they are after Lazarus as well. These are an endangered group of friends.

Jesus points out the elephant in the room. He tells his friends that Mary's act of love and generosity has another layer of meaning. It is also preparation of his body for burial.

So, in this moment death and life meet.

And what, my friends, do we learn about a moment like that? What should we do? In the same essay on healing, Father Koenig writes that healing comes through "mutual bearing of emotional burdens and [the] deep bonding" of our relationships.

We Midwesterners are really good about fixing a covered dish and taking it to friends and family after a surgery or when a loved one dies. This may be old fashioned, but it is also a deeply God-like act of care.

Simple acts of kindness are good in moments like these.

So is touching. In the United Church of Christ Book of Worship, in the introduction to the Service of Healing which we will perform in a few moments, the authors discuss the power of touch. Here's what they write:

To allow oneself to be touched is an act of openness. To touch another is an act of acceptance in which a person transfers something of oneself to another: love, affection, protection, strength, power, acceptance. Touch in the healing ministry embodies the embrace of God for the redeemed creation when in the mystery of last things God will make all things new.

One cannot overstate the importance of touching when someone is sick or suffering. Holding a hand, hugging, placing a hand on a shoulder. These are tender gifts of blessing.

But one thing I really like about Mary is that she doesn't just perform the simple act of kindness-- Mary goes all out. Faced with life and death, she confronts it with exuberance. It would be like taking out that expensive bottle of champagne that you've been saving for a birthday or anniversary and drinking it instead before surgery!

In the face of death, Mary chooses life. She cannot change the course of events. She cannot prevent what is to happen. But she chooses to celebrate anyway.

And that, my friends, is the message I draw from this story today. When we encounter those moments when life and death meet, let's choose life. Hope, faith, and joy, family, and friends—these all have healing powers. Let this exuberant act of Mary's be our model. Let's show gratitude through our love and our generosity, bringing healing for ourselves and those we care about.

Today I invite you to choose life.