

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
April 9, 2006 Passion/Palm Sunday

WISE WOMEN

"She has done a beautiful thing to me. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." ~MARK 14: vv. 6 and 9

Just in case you haven't noticed, three years and 40 million copies later, *The Davinci Code* has arrived in paperback. The movie is scheduled to premier on May 19. Dan Brown's novel follows a Harvard specialist in religious symbols unravel the mystery of a murder of a curator in Paris at the Louvre and uncover clues that lead through the works of Leonardo Da Vinci and into the catacombs of early Christian history. Unreliable purported facts and accusations of heavy borrowing from previous works aside, this remarkably popular and well-read novel has helped to a large extent with putting women seriously back on the map in regard to early Christian history. Whether Mary the mother of God or Mary Magdalene or unnamed women, *The Davinci Code* rocketed countless discussion groups and new books about women in Jesus' life out from the fringes of Christianity. In this larger than life novel, the women became a smaller story, or a foothold if you will, to the larger picture that Brown aimed to convey in his work.

Needless to say, five years and 40 sermons later, I'm preaching again on Palm Sunday for the fourth time at Memorial Church. While there are no signs of book or movie offers coming my way, I found myself significantly struck by the fact that as much as we read and hear the narratives of the palms and the passion year after year, it's a big big story. And I still feel overwhelmed by the fact that it moves so fast from triumph to tragedy. From shouts of hosanna to cries of horror at the foot of the cross it's so big and vivid it's hard to absorb it all, no matter how many times we've heard it. And invariably, there are characters or pieces of the narrative that do indeed get overlooked or pushed to the fringes.

So let me suggest and then indulge this time around on the foothold that was the first part of the passion gospel Richard and I just read for you moments ago. It's the scene in the Passion narrative of Mark where Jesus makes a stop in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper. As he so often did, Jesus enters into the social discourse of the place and proceeds to dine there. In the middle of supper, something very odd happens. A woman approaches Jesus with an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment and pours it all over his head. The disciples are stunned by this gesture and offended by her apparently shameless behavior. She probably should not have even been in the room because in those days it was clearly not the time that women should be present when the master and his male friends were chatting. Women were elsewhere, or at least they should have been. Clearly, she was out of place and as far as the disciples were concerned, in the wrong place at

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the wrong time. She is accused of waste, or as one writer put it, "of misplaced priorities," and the disciples gave her a really hard time. However, Jesus rebukes them, accepts her gesture, and commences to point out to the disciples that it is she alone who understands what is about to happen. She understands that he is about to die, and she has anointed him for the grave. Her anointing is of the same order as was the wise man's gift of myrrh at the manger. Needless to say, which story do we suspect is more widely heard and elevated in the chronicles of Christian history?

The narrative in today's gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus confers upon this woman both a fame and a future: "Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her. We do not know her name (though in the gospel of John she is called Mary) or anything of her ancestors, but hers is an enduring fame: wherever the gospel is preached, she is to be remembered, and her deed told in memory of her. And not long after this extravagant act, Jesus will ask that whenever his friends gather when he is gone, eat the bread and drink the cup, they do so in memory of him. He is to be remembered in celebrations around a table as we have here today, and she is to be remembered whenever the gospel is preached. So on this Sunday of the Passion, Palm Sunday, where at the heart of today's gospel we hear the passion of Christ, we remember her. This unnamed wise woman is in our midst, and we should not need a blockbuster novel to catapult her into our memories.

So what now for us to remember about her and from this very odd encounter before Jesus' passion and death? When we think about the larger story of the palm procession of Jesus today and the Passion Week to come, we can surmise that it is one of confrontation between two domains: Jesus procession embodied an alternative vision, one that he suggested the unnamed woman fully understood, and the other procession was that which Pilate embodied: the power, glory and violence of an empire that ruled the world. In the midst of this complex and confrontational passion narrative, what is to be remembered of the unnamed woman's extraordinary gesture is so simple it is not only overlooked, it also transcends gender.

We remember that giving is what she did. Extravagant and imprudent giving as she no doubt could not afford it. But is this **not** what true giving is: giving away what we really cannot afford or parting with what we would rather keep. So perhaps hers is an invitation to ordinary people like us to live, and therefore give, extravagantly. It goes against the grain, for we are a people naturally cautious and guarded both materially and spiritually.

We remember another compelling part of this story is what Jesus did: receiving. He accepted her gift, and therefore accepted her. It has been said it is not that what we are is what we give, but that in giving we give what we are; and to accept a gift is to accept the giver. By her giving and his receiving they shared a fellowship, a companionship, a communion so to

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speak. A sharing, giving and receiving that had as its central component a giving and receiving of gifts, and the changes that result from that exchange.

I was reminded of this perception of communion this week when I read a compelling story in the midst of the current highly publicized and politicized controversy regarding immigration reform.

It is the story about a man named Roger who has a ranch in South Texas 40 miles north of the border with Mexico. There are no paved roads leading to his property and he is there about twice a month on weekends. There is a simple house on the ranch made of wood, which has a kitchen, some bunks and a bathroom. Roger was asked if he had ever seen any undocumented immigrants, many of who make the treacherous journey north in often unbearable heat looking for work and a better way of life. "Now and again" he said. "But not very often. They don't want to be seen. But sometimes you can tell they've passed this way."

When Roger goes home at the end of the weekend, he leaves the door to his ranch house unlocked and puts cans of food out on the counter. There is a sign on the door written in Spanish. It says: "Please turn off the water and close the door when you leave. Thank you."

In the 8 years that Roger has owned his ranch he has not had a single incident of vandalism or theft. When he comes back to his ranch the door is always closed, the water is never running and the food is always gone.

If we imagine the people moving northward it is likely that some of the maps they carry with them have a big star and an arrow pointing to Roger's ranch. This is a safe place. Water and food and a friendly rancher.

How many desperate people have passed through Roger's ranch? How many of God's children have received a cup of cold water and an ounce of hope there? They are hungry, their tortillas moldy, and their water gone. They stumble upon Roger's house, read the sign, and go inside to find not only water but also food and a restroom. Imagine the stories that are told in shacks and adobe homes of the sign on his door and the miracle of food found in the nick of time. Can we hear their prayers of thanks for the blessed saint whose name they do not know?

The complexity and controversy surrounding immigration reform is terribly difficult. But regardless of where you fall on the spectrum of opinion, let's agree that Roger's house no doubt, as his friend Gordon Atkinson wrote, is marked on a thousand little maps. His ranch has been a point of giving and receiving, a point of grace larger than the land, larger than life, larger even than suffering. This kind of goodness is *con safo*, as they say on the border. Nothing can touch it.

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And what you might ask has all of this got to do with us? For starters, let me suggest that part of life, of faith, of religious practice, of Lenten disciplines, of spiritual seeking is about the desire to change our lives. About the experiment to see what life is like with faith as opposed to without faith. If we seek to make a difference in other's lives as well as our own, then let us consider taking this unsung example of the wise unnamed woman in the passion narrative and a man named Roger on a ranch in south Texas and allow it to lead us to the experience of a changed and different life:

Let us learn to be extravagant givers. What extravagance will we risk to transform our lives? What seemingly foolish, generous, gracious, uncharacteristic thing will we, often terminally tight, spiritually contained people give? Money could be the easy thing, but perhaps it is more fundamental than this. Think about the most cherished part of yourself, and these is what we must be prepared to willingly and lavishly give away. Is it your love, your time, your talent, your mind, your hand, your heart that you are not willing to share or to change?

Let us learn to be generous receivers. To be one is to be vulnerable. This requires that we let down the barriers, open the doors, let go of some inhibitions. We will never experience the joy of receiving unless we are prepared to receive what is prepared for us. The old spiritual teachers use to say that we get so little from God because we are prepared to accept so little from God.

Let us see that in giving and receiving we create communion. We share with one another, with God, in order to make a difference in our lives, in order to transform our lives. Communion is not limited to a ritual but is a path we ought hope to follow throughout our lives. Not alone, but with others, in communion with God and with one another. The compelling scene in Bethany is that the woman presumably did not know Jesus, nor did he know her. She risked it. Nor will Roger ever know, or they him, those who found food, water and shelter at his ranch. He risks it. These are examples of a communion of strangers, and this is what we must continue to remember now and always.

At this precipice of Holy Week we are meant to partake in the Passion of Jesus that we might participate in what it means to have resurrected life. He gives of himself generously, lavishly, extravagantly, in love, and we are meant to ponder that, accept it and give it away in communion with others, generously and lavishly. And it is risky. But it is this scene, this foothold at Bethany that reminds us of the whole passion, the whole gospel. This kind of goodness is *con safo*. Nothing can touch it.

For this we give extravagant thanks to God as we enter into the meditation of such mighty acts of generous life and love in this Holy Week. Amen.

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