

## Diakoneo



Moyers, Mike, *Lenten Labyrinth*, 2012  
from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville

Isaiah 43:16–21  
John 12:1–8

March 13, 2016  
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The spiritual writer, Parker Palmer, went through a protracted period of deep, agonizing depression. In his writings, he blamed it on ways that he had flown too high, become too judgmental of himself and more. But truthfully, depression cannot always be explained; it just happens. Palmer holed up alone at the Pendell Hill Quaker retreat center in a small cottage. Friends wrote to him, visited and tried to give him advice, or they gave him veiled criticisms, asking why he, a spiritual writer, should be having such difficulty. (Physician heal thyself!) But then unexpectedly, an elder Quaker would come by Palmer's cottage every day, let himself in, and bend down and rub Palmer's feet. Without a word he would quietly massage his feet, and then stand, and show himself out. Palmer said his wordless care was the very best help that he received at the worst time in his life.

Six days before Jesus' death, Mary, brother of Lazarus, sister of Martha, took costly perfume, pure Nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped it with her hair. The aroma

filled the room with pungent perfume. Without a word she showed not only her love for Jesus – who had saved her brother from the grave – but she also showed her sorrow – anointing her friend for his death, coming in Jerusalem. Mary was wiser than most; she saw the road that Jesus was on, and foresaw the tortuous path of betrayal, agony, isolation, and death. She also saw his divinity, his calling as messiah, so that she was also anointing him as king, as ruler of all. She clearly saw his death approaching. She didn't try to talk him out of it. She didn't give advice or veiled criticism. She didn't try to fix it. She didn't try to rescue him – “Marry me!” – she could have offered. No. Without a word, without a fuss, she offered the most precious gift she had...her quiet presence in love and sorrow.

We will all face death. Along the way we will face hurt, fear, and sorrow. When we do, wouldn't we want to be ministered to with quiet grace? Wouldn't we prefer to have friends and family be there for us with compassion – and not to try to deny it, fix it, or give us advice – but to just be there with sympathy, with kindness, with gifts of presence and love? Yes, that is the perfume – the precious nard – that we offer to those closest to us – especially when they are in pain, in grief, or facing death. It is the ministry of love and presence.

This is a lesson we each need to learn, not only in being with the ill, the grieving or the dying, but also in faith. It is about showing up – physically and emotionally – being present with a listening ear and a quiet soul. The problem is that too often we forget this because we focus more on ourselves. We spend so much of our time trying to prove that we are right – above average – and truly fantastic. Even in church, we want to show how much we have earned angelic wings or harps of gold.

When we use religion as another defense, another layer of armor around fragile ego, then it becomes a way to shut out God, to deny God's grace and God's love. When we use it to be right, to be better than, to be legalistic or perfectionistic, then religion can become a weapon rather than perfume. The message of the cross, the message that Mary grants us today – is that we can't earn God's love – we just need to show up. It is not a quid-pro-quo, or something we barter with – ‘if I do this, then you, God, promise to do this.’ No. It is grace. It is the wondrous beauty of God, who offers God's life on the cross in order to reconcile us all. It's about love, about a free gift, and not buying and selling.

That's why I am often offended by simplistic theologies that imply that Jesus is paying for our sin on the cross. Yes, Jesus takes our sin onto himself on the cross, but not as a kind of barter to a blood-thirsty god who demands payment. No, It is a gift of grace, like Mary's gift. God loves us so much, that all sin, all division, all selfish hatred and vice are wiped clean, so that resurrection can blossom forth. We begin again by

participating with Christ on the cross; our own small self is crucified and let go. We are given the gift of God's forgiveness and cleansing of our sins, so that we rest in the peace of God.

We tend to reduce our faith to simple formulas....money, the law, who's right, what's practical. But our faith is about grace not law, love not egotism, generosity not greed. We forget this over and over again. We reduce it to simple formulas and forms of payment. In the story, Judas patronizes Mary with his criticism, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' Judas uses this self-righteous judgment as a weapon, a cudgel. Money is an easy way to shame people, because it's a shared value and gets attention. In the church we can tend to fall into this trap, reducing the whole enterprise to dollars and cents. Believe me, there are better ways to make money than running a church! Money is needed and gratefully accepted, but it is a fruit of faith, a blossom on the flower of community, and not the root and branch.

In my former church I heard a story about a minister who served there in the 1960's. The pastor, Rev. Burkhardt, used to have the youth group study a chapter in a book a week – and he also had them play silly games. One day he suggested that the youth group hold a dance. All the kids were really excited about that. So, they held a dance, and it was a lot of fun. But in those days, the Village of Holmdel was tiny, and like a fishbowl. Some older people heard music and looked through the windows and saw dancing (!). AHH! They stormed into the church Council and complained that DANCING was going on in the church! OMG! Rev. Burkhardt suggested that the best solution was to pull down the blinds of the windows and to cover up the doors. Problem solved! Just dance. It's not all about shame, rules, and criticism; it's about grace and presence. That is what Rev. Burkhardt offered the youth of this church. That is what Mary offers to Jesus – no strings attached. She is there for him; she shows him pure love; she ministers to him – a gift of costly perfume.

But what about Mary's sister, Martha? What's going on with her? In a previous parable, Martha is seen as the one who is constantly busy, always working, and getting frustrated with her sister, Mary, who just sits and listens to the teachings of Jesus. Jesus hears Martha with sympathy, but then leans toward Mary – saying she has chosen the better part. In this story we find a similar dynamic. Martha serves Jesus and his hungry gang of disciples at table.

The Greek word is '*diakoneo*' meaning to minister. She ministers to them – as deacons ministered to and fed the early church – and do to this day. Martha is a minister. But...who gets the spotlight in this story? Clearly it is Mary. They are both ministers, both acting to serve. But Mary's wordless presence takes the cake. Hey, let's not dismiss Martha. She is doing what is essential in the church. She's making sure the

meal is prepared and served and cleaned up. Doesn't that count? Of course it does! We each have different gifts, differing aptitudes, as Paul says, and so we serve in different ways. Martha is doing what she does best – slinging the hash and balancing the dishes. She gets into the thick of things, while Mary is more quiet and prayerful.

That's what happened yesterday and Friday at the Rummage Sale. People got into the thick of it, working side by side in differing ways - 'diakoneo' – serving neighbors and then giving the proceeds away to those in need. Ministry is what churches do – whether like Mary or like Martha. In our way of doing church we tend to lean toward being Martha's. We tend to keep busy and hands-on: cooking, hauling bags and boxes, sorting clothing and donations, singing and ringing bells, teaching and caring for children, and more.

But we also have room for Mary's, for bible study, prayers, and visits offered for those who are sick or suffering, phone calls to those in grief or lonely, visits to hospitals and emergency rooms to be with those facing trials. We let people know they are loved and remembered. Ministry (diakoneo) takes many forms – but it is all about service.

Many of these caregivers are women – not unlike the example of Mary anointing Jesus' feet or Martha serving dinner. Women are clearly leaders and hard workers in this church's ministry. Sadly, the Christian tradition has largely ignored the contributions of women leaders, women as ministers and priests. This is starting to change. Of course, in the UCC we can brag that we have been ordaining women into ministry since 1852.

A few years ago, archeologists discovered a newly restored fresco in a tiny chapel in the catacombs under the streets of Rome, Italy. During the first centuries of the faith, this was where persecuted Christians crept to worship. Some of the earliest Christian iconography is found there. In the chapel of Priscilla, scholars found a portrait of a woman in clerical garb – with her arms raised in prayer. She is obviously in a leadership role, offering prayers for the community of faith. There was a bit of a dust-up about this with the Vatican – with some scholars saying this shows that women were priests and they should be allowed to be again. But the Vatican responded that Priscilla is NOT shown offering Eucharist, and therefore this cannot be proven to be a woman priest. Ho, hum. When will they ever learn...?

In serving, we all, women and men, discover sources of joy and avenues of service (diakoneo). We show up, massaging feet, visiting the sick, giving meals to the hungry, calling on those in the hospital or nursing home, offering clothing or groceries. 'Diakoneo', is at the heart of our faith. Let's keep practicing it here in Glen Ridge, as we each make our own journeys to Jerusalem, to the cross, and beyond. Amen.