

The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
April 3, 2022; Year C  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud  
*Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8; Psalm 126*

This weekend, I had occasion to call my brother-in-law about a family matter. And of course, I do not know my brother-in-law's number by heart, so I picked up my iPhone and looked up Sam Stroud. Now there are three listings for Sam Stroud in my cellphone. And in my lifetime, I have known three men named Sam Stroud—my father-in-law, my brother-in-law, and my nephew. Dad died over a decade ago, so I was pretty sure that he wasn't one of these three listings. And it turns out that none of the three separate listings were for my adult nephew. Instead, my iPhone had captured several different ways to get in touch with my brother-in-law, including a couple of previous work email addresses. I did finally reach him, and I have detangled at least that part of my contact list—but come to think of it, I still don't have a way to reach my nephew if I should need to.

I share this complicated little bit of Stroud family business because it reminds me of the detangling that is required to come to some understanding of today's Gospel reading. Who is Jesus encountering? I need only figure out three different Sam Strouds, but there are seven Marys mentioned in the New Testament—although much like my contact list, those seven Marys may represent fewer than seven people.

So, who is this Mary who pours out the costly perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair? Who is she, and more importantly, why does she do this? We read the story of Jesus in four different accounts: the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and I guess we shouldn't be too surprised that each one of these purveyors of the Good News tell different stories about women who anoint Jesus with costly perfume—and not all of them are named! Whether we start with her name or start with her action, it is hard to pin down her identity.

All of which makes me wonder if this anointing of Jesus did not happen more than once. Matthew and Mark mostly agree—an unnamed woman comes into the home of Simon the leper in the village of Bethany and pours costly ointment on the head of Jesus. Jesus identifies this action with his coming death. She has prepared him for burial before he has even died, and he defends her for it. More! She will be remembered for it. But neither Matthew, nor Mark, nor Jesus himself names her. We will remember her action even though we don't know her name.

The woman comes into the home of a leper—so we know that she is fearless. Lepers were infectious both socially and physically. But Jesus and this woman are going to enter his home and get close to him. And she carries a burial spice that is very expensive—so we know that she has means. And she pours the oil over the head of Jesus—just as Samuel anointed David and made him a King. So this unnamed woman is signaling to us that Jesus is royalty.

This might be a good time to remember that royalty is not the same thing as celebrity. Celebrities are well known because of something they did—or perhaps something they continue to do. Movie actors and basketball players can be celebrities. On the other hand, folks are born into royalty. Kings and queens are anointed as recognition of what they are born to be—chosen by God to lead God's people.

Jesus tells us that we will always remember this fearless woman, who gave of her own wealth to recognize both the divine royalty of Jesus and the humanity of his impending death. This is the anointing woman in Matthew and Mark.

But Luke tells us that an unnamed woman enters the house of a Pharisee named Simon. In this account, Simon is not a leper, but a leader among the righteous! This Simon is a Pharisee. And the woman who enters Simon's home is a sinner. Luke doesn't tell us the sin. But I am guessing that your mind goes where so many commentaries have gone before you: she is not just a sinner—she's a prostitute! But, there is absolutely nothing in the scripture to support this view. There are a lot of ways to sin—that is to purposely separate oneself from God. Some might even say that women who are prostitutes are not sinners at all, rather they are sinned against, because their economic circumstances force them into a demeaned existence.

But whatever the sin, this woman is a sinner, and she enters the home of a righteous man because she is following Jesus. And she begins to weep, and the tears fall on his feet. She wipes them with her hair, and kisses them, and anoints them with the ointment. Jesus interprets her actions not as preparation for burial, but rather a token of hospitality and love. He reminds Simon that he didn't offer to wash his feet, which was normal hospitality, but this woman has done it. And more, Jesus tells Simon and us that this woman's loving action has been prompted by her sense that in knowing Jesus her sins are forgiven.

In case you are keeping score—at least one or two women have anointed Jesus, on his head and on his feet. They have wiped his feet with their hair. They are fearless or they are weeping. They are preparing the living Jesus for burial, or they are loving him because of his divine willingness to forgive our sins.

And then we come to the story of the anointing woman, brought to us today by John. And it has some of the elements of the first account: it takes place in the village of Bethany. There is divinity in this story—because it takes place in the home of Lazarus—who just a few verses ago, Jesus raised from the dead. But in John's account the woman has a name. She is Mary. John even identifies which Mary she is! She is not Mary the mother of Jesus. She is not Mary Magdalene, who later will meet the risen Jesus. This is Mary of Bethany. And we have met her before.

Mary of Bethany is the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We know the two sisters: Mary is the one who sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him teach while Martha prepares the meal and sets the table. Martha complains, and Jesus defends Mary—even tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better thing to do in listening to his teaching. Although, you know, I always think that after he said that he also ate the meal that Martha prepared.

This Mary is a sister. Her grief over the death of her brother Lazarus seems to be the thing that finally moves Jesus to tears, and then he summons the power of God and calls Lazarus out of the tomb. And on this day, the sisters and their brother are together again, and they have invited Jesus to dine with them.

We know that Mary loves her brother, and we assume that she loves her sister. But it is her love for Jesus that makes us remember her. To quote my colleague Lindsay Hardin Freeman, the deep connection between Jesus and Mary of Bethany is symbolized when

Mary takes Jesus' feet, washes them (as a host normally would), and then pours an exotic and costly ointment on Jesus' feet. Using spikenard, a precious oil that would cost about a year's salary, she lovingly moistens his

calluses, treats blisters, wipes away the dust, and then dries them with her long hair.<sup>1</sup>

So this Mary is not a sinner, in fact, she is well connected with the divinity of Jesus. But she also recognizes his humanity because she, too, is preparing him for burial. And perhaps she even knows it is coming soon. Like all the anointing women, Mary has some ability to acquire expensive things, like that spikenard that is so aromatic that they say you can smell it down the street. This Mary is humble. And, most of all, she has a name. She is Mary of Bethany—and she and Jesus love one another.

There are one or two or three women who are fearless and weeping and humble. There are three houses; two of them are in Bethany. The host of the party is a leper, or a Pharisee, or a recently dead man come alive again. The women are rich followers of Jesus. They are sinners or they are not. They are named or they are not. They anoint on his head or on his feet. They are loving the earthly Jesus and welcoming him into their lives—or maybe it's not welcome so much as preparation for burial. Or maybe the anointing is more of a coronation of Jesus as divine than a tending to Jesus as a man. About the only thing that is common to all four stories is that the women have long hair!

You could detangle the contacts on your iPhone more easily than you can detangle these stories; the stories of the lavish love that some folks have for Jesus. It is a love that cannot be neatly categorized or explained or even imagined. The love of Jesus is shown by these women—one of them, or two of them, or three of them—and we remember them for it, even if we don't know each of their names. I like to think that each of these four stories happened—that each of our gospel reporters were telling the good news that they witnessed in a particular time and place.

I like to think that you can love Jesus if you are a sinner. And you can love Jesus if you are a devout follower. You can love Jesus if you are rich. You can love Jesus if you are poor. You can love Jesus if you are fearless or humble; happy or sad. You can love Jesus whatever your gender identity and however long your hair might be and whatever name is on your id. You can love Jesus who is King of kings, and you can love Jesus who died a shameful death.

Jesus told the people then, and we hear it from him again today, that we will remember the love that these women have for him. We will remember their love for Jesus and we will remember them. The question is, how shall we be remembered?

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<sup>1</sup> Lindsay Hardin Freeman, *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*, (2014: Forward Movement), pp.427-8.