

Sermon for Sunday, June 12, 2016  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

We've heard this story  
before.  
The fifth Sunday of Lent  
when Jesus  
was visiting his friends  
Mary and Martha and Lazarus,  
and Mary took a pound of perfume  
and anointed Jesus' feet,  
and Judas got himself all worked up,  
saying that the money she spent on the perfume  
would be better spent  
on the poor.

But this time is different.  
He's not at his friends' home  
but at the house of a Pharisee, a religious leader,  
one of those known  
for their uprightness  
and attention to the details of their faith.  
And a woman with a reputation  
sneaks in by the back door,  
stands behind him,  
and begins to cry.  
And as she cries,  
her tears begin to drip  
and wet Jesus feet,  
and embarrassed  
she crouches down  
and begins to scrub them away  
with her hair.  
And then she takes out  
a jar of ointment  
and begins to rub it over his feet.  
But this time  
it's not Judas who complains,  
but Jesus' host,

full of self-righteous  
indignation,  
muttering to the guests  
sitting either side of him.  
“How can he let  
a woman like this  
touch his feet?”

Jesus overhears.

“Simon?”

And Simon, caught in the act, turns red,  
and as if he hadn't been caught in the act of gossiping, says  
“Yes, teacher?”

And Jesus tells the story  
of the two debtors  
forgiven their debt.  
And then drives it home.

“Which one would be more grateful?”  
“The one who was forgiven the most.”

And then Jesus begins to point out the difference  
between Simon, the respected pharisee  
and the unnamed woman  
of questionable virtue.

Simon, as host, has failed to keep the rules  
of basic hospitality.  
In a culture full of ritual and custom,  
Simon has ignored all that  
treating his guest, who comes at his invitation,  
almost as  
a servant.  
He doesn't bother offering him  
a way of washing off  
the dust from the road,  
he doesn't bother to greet him properly,  
he certainly doesn't honor his guest  
with the traditional anointing of oil.

Instead he treats him  
as if Jesus is privileged  
just to be allowed to eat at his table  
and should be thankful  
for what he gets.

And then the woman, the woman with the reputation, comes  
and does everything  
that Simon has failed to do.

And instead of Simon embarrassing Jesus  
for accepting her care,  
Simon is himself embarrassed.  
But Jesus, graciously, turns the attention away from him.  
“Woman,” he says,  
“your sins are forgiven.  
Your faith has saved you.  
Go in peace.”

And the table erupts.  
“Who does he think he is,  
forgiving sins?”

And that’s the end  
of the story.  
The woman is walking out the door,  
an oily mess  
left on the floor.  
Jesus is still at the table.  
And the babble continues  
over the thought that is not spoken,  
“Only God  
can forgive sins.”  
And we’re left hanging  
with the question  
that Jesus later asks his disciples,  
“Who do you say I am?  
Is this  
the Messiah?”  
We never hear

the end of the story.

And Luke continues his story

this way:

“Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.”

Jesus  
leaves  
town.

The crowds who were there  
when he healed the centurion's servant  
and raised the widow's son  
have drifted away.  
Simon the Pharisee  
is nowhere in evidence;  
his curiosity about this traveling teacher  
satisfied,  
he has no more interest.  
And no one seems to be clamoring  
for him to stay around.  
Perhaps it's that bit  
about forgiving sins  
that has made them  
uncomfortable,  
and they'd rather he  
were far away.

Jesus leaves town,  
and now it is only those  
who are willing to give something up  
for his sake  
who stay with him.  
The twelve, handpicked,  
and some women,  
and many others,

it says.  
And it's not entirely clear  
the way the story is told,  
the way the grammar of the sentence is constructed,  
whether the many others are also women,  
whether they have also been healed,  
and who exactly  
are providing for Jesus' work out of their resources,

We know the stories  
of the handpicked ones.  
Jesus  
walking along the lakeshore  
calling out  
to Peter and Andrew,  
James and John,  
inviting Philip,  
who calls to Nathanael  
waiting  
under the fig tree.  
They follow him,  
they learn from him,  
they work with him.  
We hear of Judas who holds the purse,  
and counts coins  
for Jesus' blood.  
And Thomas  
who wants to know the way,  
and recognizes  
the truth.

And they reach far beyond the frame of the gospels,  
their stories continuing, at least in the form of legends,  
until their deaths.

But the women,  
all we have  
is three names,  
the briefest  
of identifying features.

Seven demons  
have apparently gone out of Mary,  
but the gossellers  
forgot to include that story  
in their stories.  
Was it Jesus  
who cast them out?  
And Joanna  
the wife of Herod's steward.  
Does her husband's employer  
ever notice  
that she has gone gallivanting off  
after this itinerant stranger?  
And what does her husband  
think of it all?  
Susanna  
is just a name,  
no defining characteristics,  
never to be heard again.  
Unless she is with  
those other women  
who according to Luke  
follow Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb,  
and early that first Easter morning  
with Mary Magdalene  
and Joanna  
and Mary the mother of James,  
run,  
shouting the joy of resurrection  
to the apostles  
who don't believe them.

Some women,  
following Jesus.  
And I wonder, was the woman who anointed Jesus  
one of them?  
Or did she just go home,  
his words ringing in her ears?  
Did she go back to the life

that so shocked Simon?  
Or did she become  
some stolid housewife, his words barely an echo  
amid the cooking and cleaning and childbearing?

And then there are the many others,  
who provide for Jesus and his disciples  
out of their resources.

What  
are their stories?  
Because they are so different from Simon the Pharisee,  
aren't they?

He is clearly wealthy enough  
to entertain lavishly  
and has enough influence  
to get Jesus to come eat with him.  
One evening,  
and never heard of  
again.

Instead  
we have these other followers  
to give up  
everything they have,  
in the case of the women  
defy convention,  
and use the resources they have been given,  
however small or large  
to support Jesus  
in his mission.

Many others,  
not just that day or week or year,  
but every day and week and year  
since then,  
two thousand years of "many others"  
going with Jesus  
to proclaim the good news

of the kingdom of God  
and providing  
for Christ's work  
from their resources.

People who are named,  
like Saint Augustine  
and Saint Francis  
and Mother Teresa,  
and people unnamed,  
so many more  
of them.

People  
who, like us, have in baptism,  
promised to follow and obey Jesus  
as their Lord.  
And who,  
as part of that following,  
provided for Christ's work  
through their resources.  
Just as we do.

Yesterday  
was an example of that.  
This place  
was buzzing!  
I have never seen  
so many people  
at our Strawberry Festival.  
The parking lot behind the office was packed.  
Cars were lined up along both sides of 25A.  
And people were everywhere,  
talking, buying, working.  
We used our resources - the things we made and the things we gave, the time and energy  
both before and yesterday,  
and the money we spent -  
to provide for the Christ's work here at St James.  
Just as we use our resources all year.  
The resources of our gifts,

the things we are good at,  
singing in the choir,  
helping in the office,  
hospice coffee hour,  
serving as acolytes,  
leading on the vestry,  
and so much more.

The resources of our money,  
pledging from what God has blessed us with  
to continue Christ's work among us.

But let's not rest  
on our laurels.

We haven't run out of things to do  
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ.

Every month at vestry  
we explore more ways  
to serve God here in St James.

But we are limited by our resources,  
and so we have to choose  
between one good thing  
and another.

Today,  
as you worship God,  
as you experience Christ's presence at the altar,  
what resources  
do you have  
that you could offer  
to provide for, to do,  
the work of Christ  
here in this place?