

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Year C
John 12:1-8
March 21, 2010

After reading the gospel for today, I went online to research party planning. As you do.

I soon learned there are many steps to take in order to plan even a simple dinner party.

According to the internet-savvy party-planning crowd, you are to begin planning up to three weeks ahead of your event. Three weeks!

According to these folks, you need all of that time in order to set the party's theme, polish silverware, shop for groceries, decorate etc.

I had no idea there was so much involved; I just thought you had to do some extra cooking.

Isn't the meal the most important part of a dinner party? Shouldn't the actual cooking be the most difficult part of the evening?

This is what I thought - until, of course, I read the internet articles.

One helpful party planner concluded her advice with the following tip, which was echoed by many others:

"Finally, and many people will say this is the most important factor, you need to consider the personalities of your guests and who will make good conversation together, or be willing to dance, or participate in whatever activity you've planned. Your guests don't need to know one another, but they should be able to socialize in a mixed group if they don't. And, of course, don't invite friends who get along poorly with one another to the same party - that is unless you intend to make their hostility the main event."*

If only Martha had had access to the internet!

Did you hear who was around her table?

- First there was Jesus, who Martha has already identified as the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.
- Martha's brother, Lazarus, was also there. You remember Lazarus. He was the one who smelled really bad because, well... he had been dead for four days.
- Next to him was Judas, who – we just found out - spoke a good game but stole from his friends.
- And then there was Mary.

Surely there will be no problems with this group making good conversation together!!

What isn't there to talk about?

- Jesus could talk about what it is like to be the Son of God.
- Lazarus could talk about what it was like to be dead for four days and then suddenly alive again.
- Judas could talk about his plans for social reform.

There should also be no problem socializing as a mixed group. There could even be dancing! I mean it's not like there are many social or cultural norms that are at risk of being seriously violated.

Right?

Right?

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair."

Oh Mary.

What were you thinking?

Why would you untie your hair in front of these men?

Why would you wipe our Lord's feet with, of all things, your hair?

Why would you do such a thing?

This, Mary, is not appropriate behavior for a woman in the company of men.

This act of yours is going to create hostility for sure, and likely jealousy.

The dinner party is going downhill fast.

Poor Martha – all her planning and preparation lies in a perfumy pool at Jesus' feet.

Her dinner guests are sitting at the table stunned, forks in mid air, jaws dropping open.

There is an awkward silence.

Before the party can be salvaged, Judas finds his voice.

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Ugh – don't you just hate it when someone ...especially a particularly pretentious someone - tries to lure you into a political debate...at the dinner table!

Thankfully Mary, the other disciples and Jesus don't take the bait.

The fact that the poor need to be cared for has been repeatedly established by Jesus' ministry.

There is no disputing the priority given for loving one's neighbors.

There is no argument to be had here.

Jesus is the next to speak.

And in just a few words, Jesus transforms this dinner scene from shocking and aggravating to incredibly poignant.

"Leave her alone," Jesus says. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

We no longer see into a scene marked by a dinner party gone bad, rather we look through a window to an image of the heavenly banquet.

And if it was not clear before, we now know that Jesus is as good as dead.

These other people may be preoccupied with the things that culture and society demand of them, but Mary is singularly focused.

We do not know how she is able to recognize the sacredness of the moment that is before those gathered.

But I believe she consents to a call that was given before she was born.

She places herself at Jesus' feet.
Sorrow and sensuality mix with the fragrant perfume.
Emotions are poured from the bottle as if they came directly from her heart.
Love, obedience, motive and fear become entangled as her hair brushes over his feet.

Though some scholars may think so, I don't believe what we hear described is a sexual act.

I do, however, believe it is very intimate act, very physical and bodily.

Just how you and I are used to approaching Jesus, right?

How many of us are truly able to put ourselves into that room, let alone at Jesus' feet?

I have tried to do this through prayer and it isn't easy.

What I am most struck by, however, is the smell of the room. Or rather, the smells.

Grilled meat. Middle Eastern spices. Dark red wine. Everyone's sweat. Lazarus. The smell of the street as it comes through open windows. The perfume.

Our sense of smell is so strong. Smell links our emotions to memories in an instant.

Smells bring you back to so many places you have been before.

Your childhood classrooms, the first new car you bought, the flowers at your wedding day.

These smells can bring forth emotions you thought were buried deep below.
Some smells conjure up memories so painful you would just as soon forget them.
Some smells, however, you would bottle if given the chance.

When I participated in the healing rite at my old church, the healing minister would always make a sign of the cross on my forehead with holy oil.

It smelled so sweet. So holy.

As I do most Sundays, on the day I first participated in this rite, I came home from church and took a long afternoon nap.

During my nap, the oil from my forehead seeped into my pillow.

My pillow smelled like a sweet blessing for days.

I went back for more, participating in this rite of healing most Sundays.
Mary, though, has only one opportunity to make her memory.

She falls at Jesus feet and anoints them with oil.

She brushes his feet with her hair.

The smell of a pound of this perfume will last with her long after Jesus is gone.

She has not only prepared Jesus for burial.
She has begun to prepare herself for living without him.

She is creating memories, tenderly caring for a friend who will soon pass away.

We Christians believe in this wonderful thing called anamnesis – a wonderful word we get from Greek. We celebrate this idea every Sunday we gather around the table for a taste of the heavenly banquet.

All of us are invited to this table – those of us like Judas, who are lost in our pretension and overwhelmed with the concerns of the world, those of us like the disciples who sit frozen when confronted by awkwardness or fear, and those of us like Mary, who are willing to set aside the constraints of decorum to show the true love we feel.

When we come to the table we remember what Jesus instituted at the Last Supper and we make him present with us.

Anamnesis means to remember in a way that makes memories very real and the people very present and very much alive.

What was Mary doing when she fell to the Lord's feet?

Mary is creating a memory of her Lord that she will be able to make present when she needs to.

Mary is looking toward the time when Jesus will no longer be physically alive, his body will be out of her reach, and his skin beyond her touch.

As we near the end of Lent, we mark a time when Jesus' physical presence on earth is coming to an end.

In this week before we mark the Passion of Jesus Christ, how will we prepare to face his death?

Do we dare to enter into the deep hurt that death brings; the deep hurt felt by all who loved Jesus; the deep longing they had for one more memory of their loved one, one more encounter in which they could hear the sound of his voice, feel his hand in theirs, see the love in his eyes.

We won't experience his loss like his friends experienced his loss.

But we have all experienced the loss of a loved one. We can all enter into the hurt that must have been felt by his friends, and by Christ himself.

The pain is very real.

But we choose to face it this next week in thanksgiving for the gift God gives to us through the death of Jesus Christ and in acknowledgement of the promise inherent in that gift - the promise that we will one day sit with our loved ones at the heavenly banquet prepared for all of us.

On that day we will meet Jesus face to face; and thanks to Mary's witness, we will know how to fall to the ground and worship him.

Amen.

*(<http://entertaining.about.com/od/generalpartyplanning/f/guestlist.htm>)