

March 21, 2010

Scripture: John 12: 1-8

Sermon: "Preoccupations"

Before I begin, I invite all of us to turn to the front of the bulletin and see the quote by Henri Nouwen. If you are following along in our Lenten devotionals, this was the quote for Monday of this past week. Two lines really stood out to me: "Often, people say good things about us, but we brush them aside with remarks such as, "Oh, don't mention it." These remarks may seem to be expressions of humility, but they are, in fact, signs that we are not truly present to receive the blessings that are given." As I reflected over this quote, I wondered about the many times I have done this very same thing.

As Southerners, we have our phrases that make up our dialogue. We know these phrases: "Bless her heart", "Y'all", to name just a few. Yet I think one of the main ones we say and use all the time is "Oh, don't mention it" in response to a simple "thank you", in response to a statement that responds to our gifts of love, that lifts up our qualities of character that are built upon the understanding that God calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is ingrained into us. I think it is in our DNA. We try to brush them off. We get embarrassed. We get flustered. Down deep, we really don't want recognition for these gifts as a way to lift ourselves up. We know that we do them because we love that other person. Because we are connected to that person. Because we care for that person.

But could there be another perception? Could our phrase "Oh don't mention it" be seen in another way? I had never thought of this until I read this quote by Henri Nouwen and it has worried me all week. When I use the phrase "Oh, don't mention it" in response to a thank you, I do it because I wanted to do the act or share the gift or say the compliment. But this quote got me thinking...is there another perception?

I started thinking about the other person. I started thinking about what the other person might be thinking when he or she hears the phrase, "Oh don't mention it? how does this statement make the other person feel? Does the person begin to think that that the act, the gift, the compliment really was nothing, that I don't really care, and that the gesture was an afterthought? Does the person begin to wonder, "Well, if it was really nothing, then why do it in the first place?" Do they think I only did the act, or gave the gift or said the compliment simply because I was trying to be nice, rather than seeing the act, the gift for what it really is: a gift of love, a gift of connection, a gift of deep friendship.

And as my train of thought continued down this path, I began to question what my response to this thank you, to this act of gratitude actually does to the original gift or act in the first place. Does the fact that I say "Oh, don't mention it" lessen the value of the gift in anyway? Do I minimize the gift and my connection with you through one simple phrase? And when I do that, what does that say about me? Am I really a part of the relationship that connects us? Am I fully present in this relationship? When I say this phrase, do I minimize our relationship, our connection as well? Do I miss out on the blessing that you are to me as much as you miss out on the blessing that I am to you? Is our bond as brothers and sisters in faith weakened because I am

not really present for you, connected to you, or receiving gratefully what is being offered to me and to you?

I haven't been able to get these questions out of my head all week. And so as these questions circulated around in my mind all week, I began to wonder well, what is the proper response to an act of love, to an act of gratitude, to an act of deep friendship? And the answer comes in our Scripture today through the example of Mary.

For us to really understand our text, we have to take a step back and take a look at the whole picture, we have to see what happened just a few short verses before this text. This section in the Gospel of John is a turning point for Jesus and will ultimately lead him to the cross. You see, the authorities are already getting suspicious of Jesus. He has been teaching and preaching. He has been healing. He has been talking about new life and new beginnings and the powers that be are getting restless. There is already tension mounting.

Jesus knows his life is in danger so he tries to avoid Jerusalem for a while but he gets the word that his friend, Lazarus is ill. Jesus stays around still teaching and preaching for a while until he decides to head back toward Judea to see Lazarus, much to the disciples' dismay. They remind him that the powers that be are already looking for excuses to kill him, to stone and going back to Judea wouldn't be the best move. But Jesus gets word that Lazarus has died and so they travel to Bethany to be with the family whom Jesus loves very dearly.

Now Bethany is only two miles away from Jerusalem and Jesus and the disciples know that by going to Bethany, tensions are going to mount again and the powers that be will be watching and waiting. Jesus comes to his friends, to Martha and to Mary, knowing that they are distraught, knowing that they are overcome with grief, knowing that they have lost hope. He spends time with them, comforting them, loving them and then he performs a miracle. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. He gives Lazarus new life. He gives the family hope once more. He restores and heals the broken connection once more

And it is this miracle, this new life, this new hope, this act of love to which Mary responds by anointing Jesus' feet. She anoints his feet with extravagant perfume. She responds in thanksgiving. She responds with gratitude. She celebrates new life, new beginnings, and new hope by gently lifting her Savior's feet, pouring perfume over them, washing them with her hair. Her brother has been raised from the dead! How can she not respond in gratitude? How can she not respond in thanksgiving? There is new life. There is hope. There is a new beginning. Once what was thought dead is alive. She responds to this act of love with another equally moving, another equally shocking, another equally healing act of blessing.

And Jesus doesn't respond to this overwhelming thank you by saying, "Oh, don't mention it. It was nothing." He is fully present in that moment. He receives her act of love fully and gracefully receives it in the vein that it was given. He celebrates this blessing and doesn't minimize the love, the devotion, the thankfulness in which it was given. Jesus knows through Mary's outpouring of love that she is celebrating new life, the new life that can only be through Jesus Christ. He knows that she is not able to express her thankfulness, her gratitude in words. And he understands that her thank you is an expression of her love for her Savior. That she wants to bless him just as much as he has blessed her.

Through this outpouring of gratitude, of thankfulness, “Mary...demonstrated that she knows what is supremely important in life-to give her best with all her heart in action of selfless giving to her Lord.” She knows that grace has been showed. She knows that hope has been given. She knows that life is to be celebrated with gratitude, with joy, and with thanksgiving of the many blessings that fill her life. She knows that the only way to respond to the gift of new life through Jesus Christ is through an act of love, love that reflects the same love that God has shown all of us, as children of God. Jesus has blessed her with new life, literally and figuratively, and he in turns accepts the blessings that she pours out to him in response, through love, through tenderness, through grace.

And as response to Mary’s act of love, Jesus doesn’t say, “Oh, don’t mention it. It was nothing.” He responds by telling the others to leave her alone, that she understands how short time is, and according to the other Gospels, lifts Mary up as an example of how true discipleship and true faith responds to the blessings that God has given to us as children of God. In fact, many commentators agree, that Jesus is so moved by Mary’s act of love, Mary’s act of blessing, Mary’s act of gratitude to the new life found only through Jesus Christ, that Jesus goes so far as to imitate this act of foot-washing for his disciples just a few short verses following this story, saying that this is the way they are to show God’s love for God’s children, that this is the way that they are to be servants for God’s children, that this is the way that they are to bless God’s children, to show the relationship, the new beginning, the new life that Jesus offers for all of God’s children.

In that moment, Jesus is fully present. He accepts and receives it gratefully. He opens himself up to Mary’s act of love, Mary’s act of thankfulness, Mary’s act of celebration because he knows that they are connected, not simply because they are friends, not because he loves them dearly. He does this because the gift is so precious, so costly, so expensive. You see the gift is not the costly perfume which could have been sold to feed the poor.

The gift that was given was the gift of new life, the gift that was given for all of God’s children. The blessing that was given was the blessing of God’s grace, a blessing for all of God’s children. The hope that was given was the hope that this world does not have the last word and this word of hope was and is for all of God’s children.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he didn’t say, “Oh don’t mention it.” He responded by saying, “It is finished.” He responded by saying, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” He responded by saying, “Forgiven them, Father, for they know not what they do.”

You see the gift is costly. You see the gift is precious. You see, the gift is expensive because “when Jesus...becomes the reason for our very existence, we have a different sense of value and what worth really means.”

We have been given a gift, the gift of new life, new life that can only be found through Jesus Christ. And the question comes: Are we fully present? Are we able to fully receive it gracefully? Are we able to see and understand the blessing that is being offered to us?

May we respond to this act of love with another equally shocking, another equally moving, another equally healing act of blessing. Amen.