

“Opinion of Love”
John 12:1-8
March 21, 2010

I love technology, I believe in technology, and I use technology. But technology is a lot like a hospital gown. It can open up to a side of people that I would rather not see. The Statesville Record and Landmark ran an article a few weeks ago about a man named Derone McNeill. Derone is a success story. He grew up in a housing project in Dunn and is now on staff at Statesville Christian School. He mentors. He coaches. He helps with chorus and drama, and his students love him. So, the local paper told his story and his wife was beside herself with pride. She forwarded that article to family and friends, and when they went to the link, technology allows for immediate, anonymous responses, and they were treated to a post that said things like “This is bull. He doesn't have a degree. Obviously he is not showing his true colors at Statesville Christian!” It went on with half truths and jealous insults, and of course, this brought an onslaught of responses, and then the original poster, I suppose feeling victimized, said, “I have a right to my opinion and have a right to state it without you judging my Christianity. This was not meant as a personal blow. It is an opinion and everyone has one.”

People defend themselves when they open their mouths or unleash their pen and words come tumbling out that let someone else know how wrong or stupid they are, but please, don't try to pass it off as Christian. It is a funny thing in human nature – acting ugly can almost be rejuvenating - it gives us reason to justify ourselves which allows us to think about ourselves even more – and what could possibly be more important than ourselves and our purposes? Jesus knew human nature, and he knew what would drive us and impassion us, and he tried to teach us another way. He called it the Kingdom of Heaven, and he talked about this love for one another. It is true that Jesus' words are often a challenge to figure out, but he was crystal clear on some things. It's not our ability to express our opinion that makes us Christian. Jesus pointblank said it's your love for each other. That was HIS opinion.

Given his life, and given the cross that shadowed him every day, he must have been so thankful to have a small circle of friends who understood that. Their names were Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Two sisters and a brother who seemed to think of Jesus as a brother too. He loved them, John tells us, although he does not say why and wouldn't you like to know? Was it Mary's infectious laugh that tugged at his heart? Or Martha's thoughtfulness that made him feel so at home? Or Lazarus and his sense of wonder after he walked out of his tomb? We don't know, and I am convinced that there is never really a why to love. Love just is, and Mary, Martha and Lazarus loved Jesus. They were his friends – three trusted people with whom he could be both man and Messiah.

That's the kind of friend you need when you are approaching the end – and Jesus was approaching the end. The chief priests were not happy campers with him. He offended them every time he turned around. He had the gall to talk to a Samaritan woman – and come on, he is Jewish - Jews and Samaritans don't mix. To add insult to injury, he healed on the Sabbath so evidently – at least from all outward appearances, he had little respect for tradition. But, what was most threatening now about him was that he raised Lazarus from the DEAD. He had power that they did not like, and they were coming after him. He knew it. He could feel their malicious contempt, and it was suffocating. He needed to breathe.

So, he found his friends, and as we say in the south, they looked after him. They did a very WMCC thing. *Having a bad day, Jesus? Let me feed you.* Then, their little family fell

into a familiar kitchen routine— Martha, obviously, was in charge and she had Lazarus scrubbing potatoes and Mary chopping carrots, but you know about Mary. She was easily distracted and eventually wandered off all by herself returning just in time for dinner, and dinner was good. They stuff themselves and they talk and the mood lifts a little...and Jesus breathes again, and a smile curls up at the corner of his mouth, and nobody notices that Mary has disappeared yet again. Only this time, when she comes back, she carries a little clay jar in her hands.

I wonder if Mary planned her actions in advance – if she bought that perfume with her life savings or if it was left over from Lazarus’ burial - I wish we knew more, but this one thing is plain as day. She felt such love for Jesus that she forgot herself. She forgot how improper her actions might seem. She took her hair down in a room full of men which a respectable woman never did. She poured the perfume on his feet – again, NOT done. Head maybe if you are anointing a king, but feet? Anointing feet is a burial rite. Yet, this single woman caressed those feet, and wiped them with her hair. Bizarre!

How could she do such an intimate extravagant thing in public? How could she be so uninhibited - she totally let go of the shame we may feel when we allow others to move us like that. When is the last time it happened to you? When is the last time you acted in love and you did not care what it looked like, or how much it set you back, or how extravagant it was? When is the last time someone turned on a light in your soul and you walked right into it? Sadly, this self-giving is the part of love that can make us feel self-conscious because once we submit to it, we cannot control it. Nobody wants to be rejected, so that can shut love down, but not for Mary. Mary remembered the mercy shown to her when Jesus raised her brother from the dead. Mary remembered God’s precious gift of friendship - Jesus was her friend. Mary remembered that love is at its finest when we serve others. And, she took the role of a servant, forgetting respectable manners and emptying herself without shame in remembrance of him “and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

Now, I’ll tell you something about that kind of love and that kind of goodness. It is beautiful, but it is threatening and it can make people angry. It angered Judas. Judas couldn’t stand the extravagance. I think he was jealous and he cloaked it with “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?” The writer of the Gospel of John is almost too quick in pointing out that “he did not care about the poor.” But, who does she think she is touching my rabbi, befriending my rabbi, and wasting these precious resources on my rabbi? That was his opinion and he has a right to it.

But, Mary’s opinion was that love for Jesus has no price. Jesus’ love for us has no price. But, there is a cost. At this moment of Jesus’ life, Mary was the only one who had any understanding of the cost. With her gesture, she and Jesus connected – HE understood that SHE understood. She WAS anointing him for burial just as he said, and when she stood before him with her little jar, for a moment – just one moment – it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head and everyone would have proclaimed him KING Jesus. But she did not do that. When she moved toward him, she dropped to her knees and poured the perfume on his feet...and the only man who got his feet anointed was a dead man, and Mary proceeded to rub his feet with ointment so precious that its sale might have fed a poor family for a year. She knew that there would be nothing rational or economically prudent about the death of her friend, just as there was nothing rational or economically prudent about his life. In him, the extravagance of God’s love is made flesh. In him, the unembarrassed excessiveness of God’s mercy comes to life. This little jar will not be held back and admired. This precious perfume will not be saved.

It will be opened, offered and used at great cost. It will be raised up and poured out for all of us, emptied to the last drop.

Do you find yourself in this story? Are you Judas – wanting to regulate faith and what is a responsible way to love? Are you another disciple happy to stand around and watch someone else love like a fool? Are you Mary? She is a tough act to follow because her love for Jesus triggered taking a risk - relationships are so often defined by power and whose opinion wins out, that to be moved by another, to have a heart so full of love for another, to want to serve another, is experienced as a weird unnecessary weakness. But, it's a passionate weakness.

That's what Jesus accepted from Mary. Granted, Judas had a valid point about the poor, but I'll you, Jesus knew that if his disciples had the passion of Mary, no one would be in need. The trouble was not that the poor will always be with us. The trouble was the passionless, half-hearted efforts on behalf of his followers. So, Jesus defended Mary to his 'disciple.' Leave her alone. Leave. Her. Alone. Then HE re-enacts Mary's foot-washing in the very next chapter with his disciples. And, he gives them their identity statement. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Isn't he a broken record? Love is the defining characteristic of disciples. Love is how Christians distinguish themselves. Love, love, love.

How many times have you heard this message from me? Quite a few. That is because love is easy to say and so hard to do. Nobody ever gives us the specifics and what should be our defining characteristic is what we struggle with most of all. Healthy Christian love is never a given. It must be intentional and personal, and Lord knows, it takes practice. A chiropractor once shared with me that chiropractic doctors learn their art by practicing on each other while they are in school. They sometimes bruise each other and totally misadjust each other, but in the end, they've learned what they need to know, and they graduate and they leave the safety of the classroom to go out and help others. That's a lot like church. Church is where we practice – it's a school of love. This is the classroom to observe, to listen, to get assignment and to learn - even when it doesn't feel right or natural and even when you get bruised or twisted or turned the wrong way. If we use Mary as a tutor, she tells us to go outside of our comfort zone. So, why not practice this week? I'm not asking you to wash someone's feet with your hair. But, look around this sanctuary. Flip through your church directory. Find someone – just one person - who makes your life richer by their presence...and here comes the scary part. Tell them. Practice. Show them that you are fully capable of recognizing love and acting on it. You never know. Your expression of love may be just what someone needs to breathe again, and it may break something open in your heart too – just my opinion.