

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

March 21, 2010

Rev. Roger Rapp

Worship Theme: Anointing and Anticipating

John 12:1-8

As noted in the time with children, anointing is a theme in today's Gospel reading. Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume. Stories in the Bible are interesting, and sometimes fascinating, but there is a reason for them being there.

Thus, there is more than anointing going in this story . There is also anticipating. Webster's dictionary defines anticipating as looking forward to something happening. To look forward to an event, to foresee and to imagine the future.

We are always looking forward to things. Sometimes we look forward to events going on around us. Health care reform. The march toward the NCAA college basketball championship, Spring break, a birthday, an anniversary. Close to our lives, Mary is in Los Angeles this week, as we anticipate the birth of our second grandchild, scheduled for this Wednesday!

Anointing and anticipating. That's the theme for today.

In researching for today's sermon, I discovered the story of the Asamkirche. The Asamkirche is a treasured Baroque church located in Munich, Germany. I have not seen the Asamkirche, but if we ever get to Munich, I would make a point of seeing it. I read that lining the walls of this exquisitely decorated yet surprising small church are large paintings depicting scenes from the life of Jesus. One painting near the front of the church illustrates the story of Mary wiping the feet of Jesus with her hair. Another painting, halfway down the other wall, illustrates the familiar scene to many of us that shows Jesus wiping the feet of his disciples after the foot washing. So we have two paintings in this beautiful Baroque in Munich. Both involve Jesus. One with his feet being anointed by Mary and the other with him washing the feet of his disciples, or followers. One observer feels that the two paintings should not have been separated, but should be displayed side by side.

Mary pours out her love for Jesus by pouring on his feet a costly perfume, an extravagant and scandalous act. By letting down her hair to wipe Jesus' feet, she violates the custom of the day that forbids women from letting down their hair in mixed company. Yet nothing can stop her because of her love and compassion for our Lord. In a similar way, when Jesus washes the feet of his followers, this is a surprise and for some, embarrassment. Jesus taking on the role of a servant? Some may remember in this story

how Simon Peter objects and says that it should be the other way around. Peter should be washing the feet of Jesus, so he thinks.

Like Mary before him, Jesus, does not waver in his commitment and love for his followers, and so anoints the feet of his disciples just as Mary has previously anointed his feet. It's as if she anticipates Jesus later action in her expression of honor and devotion.

I remember last year, when I led Holy Week services in another congregation, we did the footwashing ritual on Maundy Thursday. As we did it, I wished that I had done it many years earlier.

What might a third painting look like at Asamkirche? This one depicting a twenty first century footwashing or anointing? How would that third painting, if it were there, illustrate the extravagant and scandalous love of the first two paintings? Perhaps a man kneeling at the bedside of a woman with AIDS whose family has rejected her because of her illness. Perhaps a young girl kneeling next to a homeless man in order to give him a part of her weekly allowance. Or like Paula Egan-Wright, a local language teacher in Cheyenne, who several weeks ago, went to Haiti to assist in the disaster stricken population. She went as a translator, because in the 1980's she had served in the Peace Corps in Haiti, had learned the language, and was able to translate for the medical personnel who were providing assistance to the ill and suffering.

To me there is another message in the Anointing and Anticipating that is going on in today's reading. What looks like foolishness and extravagance to his followers, Jesus sees something else at work. Jesus anticipates, he knows what is ahead. He knows that he will be betrayed and strung up on a cross. The fragrance of the perfume on his feet blesses them for what is to come later. Nails piercing the feet, the smell of blood pouring out on the cross, spilling on the ground below, while his followers, and his mother Mary in particular, cry out in horror and anguish at the great injustice that is going on right before their eyes.

In the movement toward death, which includes all of us, we have a God that does not just watch from above, but shares in the oftentimes godforsakenness of our lives and in the life of the world. We have a God who bears us up even as we are bent down in depression, anxiety, and despair. We have a God who anoints us in our baptism. We have a God who walks with us during the baptismal journey that follows. We have a God who is with us in life.....we have a God who is with us in death. We have a God who gives victory in Spirit when we are betrayed and comprised.

A few days ago, one of our theological journals in the Lutheran Church succumbed to the economy. In its last printed edition, on the back page, was a reprint of the cover of the first edition, February, 1979. What a pleasant surprise to see my friend and colleague, Rev. Dave Zellmer, on the cover which pointed to a feature article on he and his ministry. I didn't know Dave Zellmer

in 1979, but worked with him later in 1988-90 on staff of the Nebraska Synod. When I emailed Dave and congratulated him on his recognition, he sent an email back and thanked me for remembering. Then he added these words. "Life is short. We have not much time to gladden the hearts of those who journey with us. So be swift to love. Make haste to be kind."

Borrowing one line from Rose Burrows sermon of two weeks ago, "Our lives are not an incident, or an accident. We have God's signature on our lives." None of us know how much time we have. What counts is what we do with our time.

The act of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus was echoed when our Lord himself washed his disciples feet, and then commanded them to love one another, as God has first loved us. We continue the anointing with the gifts of our lives, and with the presence of Christ visible and present in our faith communities, when we are healthy and strong, and when we are broken and need healing and restoration. In so doing, we anticipate the victory of God over sin and evil, even in our own lifetime and in our own experiences.

A number of days ago, I discovered a verse that seemed to capture theologically and poetically our theme of Anointing and Anticipating that we see in today's Gospel lesson, a theme that continues to resonate in the world we live in today.

This verse was written for Lent this year by Susan Cherwien, Poet and Hymn writer, who teaches worship at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. I shared it with the session last Monday, in memory of Lee Stover, our youth director who died suddenly of natural causes on February 24th of this year. This was Susan's entry on that day:

*O God, with hope I enter in
And call to mind your desert grace;
To wayworn people you have been
A presence in the wilderness.*

*But far from Sinai have I roamed
And bear the hidden wounds of strife;
Away and worn, I yearn for home;
Athirst, desire the spring of life.*

*O break the rock, let water flow
And wash the dust and drought from me;
I taste your peace, your presence know,
And drinking deep, am healed and free.*

*How shall my days your grace proclaim;
How shall my deeds your healing prove?
An open heart will praise your name;
My grateful life will sing your love.*

*O God, with joy I enter in,
Restored and precious in your sight,
For in your grace I live again
In lands of honey and delight.*

Amen. And Amen...