



**Proper 29, Year A – October 16, 2011**

**A Homily preached by the Very Rev'd Robert Pynn**

There are many things that can put a preacher at risk. One of them is telling stories about your family. Highest on the danger list is telling stories about your wife. I may be homeless after this little disclosure.

A good number of years ago Helen was very ill and had to enter the hospital. As you may know, patients being admitted to the hospital have the option of including their religious denomination on a list available to clergy or pastoral visitors. She was in no humour to entertain a bevy of clerical visitors. Her solution was to list her religious affiliation as Druid. I kid you not!!

As her difficult stay lengthened the one thing that she did want was to be anointed. In speaking about this later I was struck by her intuitive desire to enter the ancient mystery of this simple act of loving abundance.

All who are ill are aware of two histories in play. There is an outer history that comprises treatments, procedures and progress reports. The medical chart outlines this rational process and is the sign of a patient's external history. But there is also an inner history. This is where the patient lives with all the anxieties, pain, questions and, yes, the faith that sustains hope in the cloud of uncertainty that often engulfs the sufferer. A sacramental act of holy unction brings together outer and inner within the mysterious unfolding of healing.

There was a time when those in the medical professions were given an almost god-like status as if they actually had the personal power to heal. But we know this is not the case. Even the shamans of more superstitious times invoked a holy source. Jesus always pointed to his divine source as the energy of any process of healing he set in motion. He resisted the celebrity of being an ace healer in his world. It was never about him it was about the loving energies of the One who brought him into the world and the transformation of a broken life.

This is the essence of what any of us in serving professions are about. We learn to set up the right conditions for healing to take place, and thank God there are many among us who are magnificently skilled in those healing arts. We know that we are not the sole agents of any happy outcome. We are, at best, channels of a mysterious presence that knits together the inner and outer conditions of persons given to our charge.

But anointing is not just a rite for those who are ill; it is also associated with the preparation of a body for burial. The most famous New Testament story is told in the gospels according to Mark (14:3-9), Matthew (26:6-13) and John (12: 1-8). At a dinner in the home of Lazarus at Bethany, Mary takes a pound of the most precious perfume and pours it all out, anointing Jesus' feet and then wiping his feet with her hair. In Mark

the perfume is poured over Jesus' head in a classic act of anointing. In all cases the whole house was filled with the perfume's fragrance. Unfortunately, the argument that follows misses the whole point of the anointing. Judas and other disciples are all bent out of shape at the waste ---after all think of how the money paid for this expensive perfume could have benefited the poor.

The disciples represent the ascetic response that they also carried forward into the life of the Christian community after Jesus' death. Their asceticism has dominated Christian institutional dogma and practices to this day.

Jesus chooses his beloved Mary over them. Her profoundly sensual anointing is a tantric<sup>1</sup> expression of love's uncalculated abundance flowing from her heart. Mary knew, better than any of the disciples, the abundant ground of Jesus' Wisdom and was in like manner preparing him for the critical moment of his death.

*"Jesus said, Let her alone. She had done a beautiful thing. ... she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. Wherever the gospel is preached in the world, what she has done will be told in her memory."*

What has she done? Mary has shown anointing to be a profound act of extravagant love. In doing so she has also broken open the ascetic rationalism and tightness of spirit that dominated among the male disciples. Of course the anointing was a waste according to calculating reason and the desire to feed the poor is compelling part of Judas' argument. (I suspect that the moral argument was more a function of a critical attitude toward Mary's loving act than of a true concern for the poor.

Any authentic act of anointing involves a depth of holy waste that drowns the calculating mind in another mind. Anointing bathes us with a mercy that drives us beyond the rational mind to the mind of Christ, the anointed one. You see calculating love is not love at all. Without the abundance of the heart nothing great can happen.

What has she done? She has taught us about anointing as the energy transfer of love---not just her love but also the Sacred Love from which her passion derives. All of us receive this in the Chrism of baptism. It is much more than a cute act of liturgy! Jesus was clear that anointing is a sign of our personal inclusion in a mission-oriented fellowship. This is very clear from the scripture he read at the synagogue in Nazareth.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."*

Now, a last word: Jesus was a master of energy transference. Anointing symbolizes this spiritual truth. Poured over feet, hands, or head—the exchange bears an energy that

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<sup>1</sup> Tantric denotes a tradition whose spiritual orientation is based on welcome and abundance in contrast to the ascetic tradition's preoccupation with judgment and scarcity.

penetrates the soul. Without the transference of Love nothing great can be accomplished. Love adjusts our inner alignment with the Core of our core. Connects us to the sacred river of compassion that flows through us unencumbered, uniting mind and heart in compassionate living. We need only surrender our misalignments that pinch off the energy flow and let the divine practitioner lay his hands upon us -- drown our being in his essence.

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