

Being Present (Anointing)

Psalm 23, Mark 14:1-9

Center Church, Hartford

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Jesus said of this woman who sought to bring comfort to the Comforter that “she has done what she could.” Some translate that line as “she has done what she could *when she could.*” Others “She has done what was in her power to do.” She had heard Jesus say he was going to be killed. She knew the vibe of the city. She loved him and knew she could not stop what was about to happen. She could not take down the religious and political establishment. She was helpless in so many ways, especially as a woman in that time.

So, she did what she could. She had a little money. She bought some anointing oil. She wanted to soothe his head and shoulders. Other versions of this story have her massaging his feet, and if you have ever had anyone do that for you, you know how good it feels. The oil was scented, and the smell filled the room so that others, at least those who were open to it, were comforted as well.

What she did was beautiful, because she seized the moment and was not intimidated or embarrassed by what others might think. She acted out of love, extravagantly, but also intimately. She could not change what was to come, but she could be present for Jesus, doing what was in her power to do, at the moment he needed it most.

I have often wished I had been given the gift of curing. Like ET in the movie, I would like to be able to reach out my hand and bring physical, mental or spiritual cures to those who suffer.

It is not my gift. For most of us, it is not our gift.

That does not mean, however, that we are not called to ministries of healing. Remember that healing is different from **curing**.

Curing is about fixing, and, of course, we want to fix what is wrong! But for most of us, unless we are professional healers, that is not our call. If all goes well, many of us are cured of illnesses by medication or the work of nurses, doctors, physical therapists, etc. Sometimes we cannot be cured, but that does not mean we cannot receive or give healing for mind, heart and spirit. The spirit-theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote: "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand." (Quoted in Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, p. 206)

Take a moment and think of who in your life that is now or has been in the past. (Pause) Now take a moment and think of who in your life you are now or might be present for in that much simpler but more vulnerable way than "fixing." Hold those people in your hearts.(Pause)

Many have lamented that this woman's name was not remembered along with her loving care toward Jesus, but in a way, I am glad. Because that means we can all imagine we might be her. She represents a ministry of discipleship that has been part of the Christian life from the beginning, and part of what the church has understood its role to be in the world. Its' important for us to remember and claim that, I think, as we consider what it means to be Center Church. How can we **be present**? How can we anoint (literally or metaphorically) those within our congregation and those around us in the city for healing, even if we cannot cure all the ills that walk through the doors of the Church House or the Meetinghouse or swirl around these streets every single day?

The writer Brene Brown offers one thought. "I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away...But the church isn't like an epidural; it's like a midwife...I thought faith would say, 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort, but what it ended up saying was, 'I'll sit with you in it.'" (Brene Brown: Jesus Wept, video)

Here we sit, smack dab in the middle of Hartford. Think about the city around us. We have people in suits going in and out of the Travelers Building and other office buildings around us. We are across the street from a large apartment complex on two sides. There are people coming and going at bus stops and on Lime Bikes. We look on Bushnell Park, where people walk, and play, and often sleep at night for lack of other shelter, or at our own front porch here where people also often sleep. From my office in the winter I can see the Capitol Building, where people struggle to make sound and ethical decisions that affect all our lives in this state.

And here is Center Church. In the Center. Our new steeple and clock and bell proclaiming, what? I hope, proclaiming that all those people who can see and hear it are loved by God, and by us. We do indeed work to help fix what is wrong in many peoples' lives; again, ask Logan, or Jana, or Marie or Monique or Tom or Charlotte or me, or the volunteers down in the WROCC's walk in hours or at the Sunday dinners or morning coffee ministry.

But there is much we cannot fix, and yet can be a healing presence by being present in the lives of those around us here. By sitting with each other and with others we don't know. By simply acknowledging their pain and their humanity, whether they are homeless or politicians, business people, apartment dwellers or LGBTQ folk who have been rejected in too many families and churches. The ministry of presence is not to be belittled as making no difference. As this woman's story shows, Jesus thought it made all the difference in the world.

Sometimes I know people come to church to find comfort in their own pain. You hope that in music or prayer or scripture or proclamation or just the presence of the people around you, the beauty of the space or the spirit of the gathering, you will be anointed with a touch of healing presence. Right now I would like to give each of you that anointing, if you want it. (walk around and anoint)

Now, I am also going to give you a gift. Here is a small vial of scented oil. I invite you to consider who needs you to sit with them this week, to anoint their hand or head or whatever hurts, if they will allow you, without embarrassment or intimidation, like the woman with Jesus. Do what you can when you can. Do what is in your power to do. Do what people consent to receive. Be present. And let us continue to pray about how we, as the church in the Center of things here, can be an anointing, healing presence in a deeply troubled time. Amen.