

What God in Christ Assumed: Our Love

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair.”

The story before us this week in John’s Gospel, read through the lens of our Lenten series, sent me running to St. Augustine and his reflections on disordered love. Augustine “taught that we are most fundamentally shaped not...by what we believe, or think, or even do, but by what we love.” [Tim Keller] “...living a just and holy life,” he wrote in 426 A.D., “requires one to be capable of...lov[ing] things...in the right order”: requires not loving what *is not* to be loved, or not failing to love what *is* to be loved, or not having a greater love for what should be loved less.

Dante had Augustine’s disordered love in mind when, nine hundred years later, he wrote about the seven deadly sins in *Purgatorio*: “The proud, envious and wrathful were guilty because of *misdirected* love; the slothful were guilty of *deficient* love; and the avaricious, gluttonous, and lustful were guilty of *excessive* love.”

More recently, in *The Road to Character*, David Brooks cites Augustine in a chapter on disordered love. “I was bound,” Augustine writes, “not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me prisoner. The consequence of a distorted will,” Augustine goes on, “is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links...connected to one another...a harsh bondage held me under constraint.” Brooks comments that Augustine was “divided against himself. Part of him sought the shallow pleasures of the world. Part of him disapproved of these desires. His desires were [out of order] with his other faculties. He can imagine a purer way of living, but can’t get there. He was restless....”

What is addiction, I thought, but a disordered love, a harsh bondage that holds a person under constraint, a habit formed that, without resistance, becomes necessity. “Augustine,” another theologian writes, “has put his finger on the very pulse of our times.” This afternoon, our choir will premier Lew Spratlan’s setting of a poem that was written by a sister whose brother is in the grip of heroin addiction, a poem that holds in solution the experience of disordered love that addiction is. “I’ve never flirted, danced or played with you,” the poet says to heroin:

But I know you./I’ve watched my brother/Stalk, hide, and run from you, all at the same time,/Not wanting to find you/But needing to/For one moment of clarity,/One moment to breathe,/One moment to escape./I’ve never listened to your promises, whispers, or songs,/But I know you./I’ve heard you in his screams,/Haunting his dreams,/He just wanted to be free,/But he was always getting pulled by you.

“Thou hast made us for thyself,” Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, “and my heart is restless until it rests in thee.” In sum, Augustine believed God made human beings to be lovers of God. When our love is properly ordered, our love of all other people and things emerges from loving God above all. Yet when we love things more than God (people here being included in the category of things), we are restless, running from one thing to another thing, always asking of things what they were never made to deliver. Like Augustine, we imagine a purer way of living, but cannot get there.

The story of Jesus’ anointing, a story told by all four Gospel writers, seems to me to be a story of disordered love. In Luke’s seventh chapter, placed at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus is at a dinner party in Galilee in the house of Simon the Pharisee. A woman who is a sinner from the city crashes the party, carrying an alabaster jar of extremely expensive ointment. She bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them and then anoints his feet. Simon quietly objects that Jesus allows a sinful woman to touch him. Jesus responds with a parable and a rebuke of Simon. Misdirected love not on the part of the woman but of Simon.

In Mark and Matthew, Jesus’ anointing takes place in the house of Simon the leper who lives in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. It is two days before the Passover. A woman arrives and anoints Jesus’ head with costly ointment. In Matthew, all the disciples object; in Mark, some who were there objected because the ointment could

have been sold and the money given to the poor. In both Gospels, Jesus tells the critics to leave the woman alone. “She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me...she has anointed my body for burial.” Again, misdirected love on the part of the critics.

John conflates these three versions of the story. It is six days before the Passover. A dinner party is being thrown for him--not by Simon the Pharisee or Simon the Leper but by Martha and Mary. Presumably it was a dinner to thank Jesus for raising their brother Lazarus from the dead. Through the lens of our disordered loves, what do we see?

Consider Martha who served (John perhaps remembering a story in Luke about Martha being busy in the kitchen). I suppose you could say that Martha loved duty more than she loved Jesus, though I am not sure this story warrants that judgment. But I do know my own life does. I know my tireless sense of responsibility, my busyness masquerading as purposefulness, the obligations that keep me from my chief end, all these are what I love more than I love God. It is my heart curved in on itself so that, as Martin Luther observed, even the things I think I am doing for a higher love, I am doing for myself. Like the parent, one commentator said, “who discovers that her desire for her children to flourish and succeed is hopelessly [mired] in her own needs and insecurities; or the martyr in T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, who finds that, deep down, his willingness to die for his faith is little more than a dramatic act of self-congratulations, an effort to prove his own piety to God and to others.” Disordered love.

Next consider Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, and, according to some, the elder brother of Martha, Mary and Lazarus! Judas is the apostle “who ultimately regrets his own devotion and the devotion of others to Jesus, who would prefer ultimately to use the power of this devotion for something which his own judgment considers better; [the apostle] for whom Jesus is finally less important and indispensable than this better thing....For [Judas, Karl Barth says, discipleship]...is not an end in itself, but a means to some other end.” Judas “has a greater love for that which should be loved less.” Were it not for John’s parenthetical comments about Judas, we might say that it was his greater love of a cause, a political ideology, an ethical ideal that resulted in his lesser love of Jesus. But John wants us to know that the particular disordered love of Judas was his excessive love of money, his avarice. In either case, God knows that we are a nation of people who love our causes and our money more than we love God, a reality that should give us all pause before the mixture of Judas’ liberal politics and his conservative self-interested economics that lead him to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and a kiss. Disordered love.

Now consider Mary, the sister Luke also places at Jesus’ feet. From the self-justifying perspective of our own disordered love, we are her critics. Assuming Mary is simply trying to buy Jesus’ love with her extravagant waste of precious perfume, we jealously judge her. But in every version of this story, Jesus calls off the woman’s critics and commends the extravagance her love dares. What she did “was utterly prodigal, a wholly generous and selfless, and at the same time an absolutely humble action...that...honors [Jesus’] dead body in anticipation,” Barth says. Perhaps. But I bet Mary went to bed that night and could not quite help congratulating herself for what she had done and what Jesus said. Disordered love.

Finally consider Jesus. Six days after the supper in Bethany where he was a guest, he would host his last supper in Jerusalem. Not Mary but Jesus now kneels at the disciples’ feet to wash them. Then he declares that the one to whom he gives a piece of bread dipped in wine will betray him. Giving the bread to Judas, he says, “Do quickly what you are going to do.” Through the lens of the disciples’ disordered loves, “some thought, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the festival’; or, that he should give something to the poor.” But seen through the lens of God’s redeeming love at this table, God in Christ was assuming our disordered loves as his own. In fact, precisely while those closest to him were loving every other thing in the world but him with deathly consequences, John says that he loved his own who were in the world “to the end,” “utterly, completely,” “finally.”

This morning, you and I will take the bread he gives us, dip it in the cup, and go out to betray him by loving what *is not* to be loved, or by failing to love what *is* to be loved, or by having a greater love for what should be loved less. If Augustine is right, if we are most fundamentally shaped not by what we believe, or think, or even do, but by what we love, thank God that our every lesser love has been redeemed by him who loved us first and will love us to the end.