

## **“Beautiful Action: Beauty and Salvation Part III”**

Sermon for March 21st, 2010 by Joe Summers

As human beings, we are born into a species on a journey from where we know not, and going where we know not. This can be more than a little frightening, which leads some, in their desire for a greater sense of security, to want to find some absolute ground of knowing. This attempt to take what is mysterious, fluid, and infinite, and make it into something that is finite, fixed, and static is what the ancient Hebrew people called idolatry. They saw this desire as at the heart of what keeps human beings from recognizing, appreciating, and honoring this earthly paradise we inhabit. The most common forms of idolatry take the form of seeking to be above others by having control and power over them through political domination, cultural and religious subjugation, and economic exploitation.

But if on this earthly journey, where we can never know absolutely what it's all about, if we are not to give in to the anxious grasping of our hearts, how can we ground ourselves in such a way that we can be our best selves and live the best lives possible on this mysterious journey?

One way to ground ourselves is to learn to be as present as possible, in Buddhist terms, “to be awake”: to learn how to let go of our anxious projections, to learn how to be present, to learn how to be open and receptive to reality, even if it involves suffering and heartache. Prayer is about transformation, our hearts transformed from the stone of fear and despair into the vulnerable flesh of humanity. I think we see Jesus illustrating for his disciples what becomes possible when we let ourselves, through prayer, be reborn in the One whose love for us helps us to let go of our need to control or please others.

In an essay on “The Parables of Jesus”, Erik Erickson points to an almost opposite way to root ourselves. As he suggests that, at the heart of Jesus teaching, is an understanding of the great strength that can come to us, if we let ourselves really connect with others in the present. A people cut off from the past, heading into an unknown future, can draw incredible strength from each other by really connecting with each other in the present.

Our gospel today suggests that actions are a third way to ground ourselves and to be strengthened to be our best selves. Actions can create new spiritual realities. Today, continuing my reflections on beauty and salvation, I want to reflect on beautiful action.

What are some of the actions that have helped save me, that have helped me live in the land of the living, rather than under the dominion of death?

After last week's service and the image of being born and sustained in the light of the eyes of another, I found myself thinking about Mrs. Donnelly, the mother of one of my best friends, who lived in a house just over our back fence. As a child I would go sit on her kitchen counter, while she did house work, and just talk to her. I vividly remember how much I liked her and how much I sensed she liked me and how the space that created was such a comfort in the midst

of my world that was becoming increasingly tumultuous.

Thinking of saving actions, I also think of the night I had a nervous breakdown, while visiting my parents, when I was 17 years old. I felt I couldn't tell them what was happening to me, because they had been so devastated by my sister's breakdown. Instead I went into their room shaking, my mind raging out of control, and told them I felt really sick. For the first and, I believe, the only time in my life, my dad came in and slept with me and held me through my night of terror. It didn't save me from the aftermath of the breakdown, but it was a vital link that helped me stay connected to my humanity and ultimately helped undo so much of the garbage that had happened between us.

I've also been saved by the actions of people I only knew slightly or never knew. I remember touching the scars on the head of one of my mom's closest friends, Barbara Deming, scars that were the result of the numerous beatings she had received in the pursuit of human rights for African Americans. It left me with a tangible sense that it really was possible to stand up for something you believed in. I remember how much Martin Luther King's presence, his voice and actions as I witnessed them on television, became something for me to hold onto amidst what I feared would be the deluge of violence that could break out at any time in the South, in response to the Civil Rights movement. There was no clear way forward, but I could see what it was to be your best self in the midst of that situation. I remember reading how Desmond Tutu broke down and cried in the midst of negotiations with Prime Minister Botha, the head of the South African government, because he felt Botha's hardness of heart. Later it came to me that if Desmond Tutu could risk crying in front of his enemies, I should at least be able to learn how to cry in front of my friends -- and I've gotten better and better at crying ever since.

In John's gospel today, Jesus is touched by Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, in such a way that it stirs him to the core of his being. In John's account it is Judas who objects, saying that the expensive perfume should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor, because Judas was stealing from the common purse. But, in Mark's gospel, it says it is the disciples who are indignant. In Mark's gospel Jesus is also clearer in his rebuke of them: "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.... She has done for me what she could, she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly I say to you--wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Take a moment to think about what it would have been like to live in a world where you walked around barefoot in sandals, your feet exposed to the weather, the elements, the dirt and then to have someone come along and anoint them with oil and wipe them with her hair. Jesus clearly experiences this incredibly sensuous action as a blessing. I would suggest he experienced it as fortifying his soul to do what he's on his way to do. He's headed into Jerusalem, where he knows his confrontation with the authorities will lead him to be arrested, tortured, publicly humiliated, and killed, and in the process be abandoned by his friends and disciples. Faced with all that, something that really comforts you can make all the

difference.

And Mary's actions turn out not only to make a saving difference for Jesus but for all the disciples. It cannot be a coincidence that a day or two later, when in their last supper together, Jesus tries to fortify and strengthen his friends to survive and overcome their approaching abandonment and betrayal of him in their terror by stripping naked and washing their feet, I suspect as lovingly as his feet were washed, as a way of letting them know that their coming actions were, to him, no more than dirt that can be washed away in love.

That almost all of Jesus disciples should not only return to him after their betrayal, but come to be people who came to have reputations of being as courageous and out there as Jesus was, testifies to their coming to be saved from all kinds of things that formerly held them captive. And I suspect one of the actions that helped save them from these realities was Jesus washing their feet, which might not have happened if Mary hadn't been moved to wash his feet.

A beautiful action can make all the difference in the world. The song of the Holy Spirit, Psalm 23, says "lead me in paths of right actions for your name's sake." The Holy Spirit and right action feed and sustain one another. That's why the book of the Holy Spirit in the new Testament is called "The Book of Acts."

We would not remember Jesus in the same way if he had only been a preacher and teacher. It was his willingness to act in a way that exposed the powers of hell, who were wearing the mask of legitimacy, and to reveal the true face of God, though it cost him his life, which made the saving difference. And that action, of going to the cross to free others, to save others from the inner and outer powers that had them enslaved, is perhaps the most reflected-on action a human being has ever done. Millions, ever since, have experienced salvation, in one form or another, through reflecting on it and listening to its saving message.

So let us this day remember that actions, contrary to what the cynics say, do make a difference. Let us remember the actions that have helped save our souls. Let us remember that, though sometimes what is most needed is simply being present, or the right word, or prayer, other times what makes the saving difference is action. Actions can be love, words, prayers embodied. Sometimes there is no way for love to be experienced, no way for words to be heard, no way for prayers to be effective--except through action. Holding someone through the night, facing down one who would keep others living in terror and humiliation, pouring out your love on another not counting the cost, working to ensure that those who have no health insurance get health insurance, can be the seeds of resurrection and New Creation.

For if we are willing, God is able. And if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.



