

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Poured Out”**

**A sermon by  
Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**

**Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 21, 2010**

**Isa. 43:16–21; Ps. 126; Jn. 12:1–9**

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**Prayer of illumination:** *Lord Jesus Christ, accept our songs of praise as you journey to the Cross; and enable us both to grieve its necessity and to be renewed by its power; for your name's sake. Amen.*

It's six days before the Passover.

The event is a dinner party in Bethany in Jesus' honor,  
commemorating an unexpected reunion of beloved friends,  
occasioned by the resuscitation of Lazarus,  
all but dead, until Jesus intervenes.

It's the celebration of a miracle.

Martha is there, faithfully serving tables, as is her custom.

Lazarus is there, silent, as is his custom.

To be the recipient of a miracle, perhaps, is sometimes not to notice;  
now you don't see him, now you do;  
gone yesterday, here today.

No “thanks” rolls off the lips of this new and improved Lazarus.

Perhaps he's speechless, struck dumb, incredulous  
as he gathers with family and guests around the dinner table,  
as if nothing supernatural ever happened.

Life goes on, post-miracle, it seems.

In the book *Peace Like a River*, the book's 11 –year-old narrator, Reuben Land, explains the miracle of his own birth, using these words:

*Real miracles bother people, like strange sudden pains unknown  
in medical literature.*

*It's true: They rebut every rule all we good citizens take comfort in.*

*Lazarus obeying ordering and climbing up out of the grave –  
now there's a miracle,*

*and you can bet it upset a lot of folks*

*who were standing around at the time.*

*When a person dies, the earth is generally unwilling to cough him back up.*

*A miracle contradicts the will of the earth.*

*My sister Swede," he says, "who often see to the nub*

*offered this: People fear miracles because they fear being changed –  
though ignoring them will change you also.*

*Swedes said another thing, too, and it rang in me like a bell:*

*No miracle happens without a witness.*

*Someone to declare,*

*Here's what I saw. Here's how it went. Make of it what you will.*

*(Leif Enger. *Peace Like A River*. p. 3)*

Jesus is present, chatting it up with friends and disciples.

And Mary wafts into their midst like a zephyr,

toting a pound of sweet-smelling stuff.

All are witnesses to the resuscitation.

All now are on orange alert due to the threat of danger

that this latest, most-spectacular miracle has generated

just outside the door.

For Mary, Martha and Lazarus, this is their last supper with Jesus.

And Mary, as is her custom, speaks little, but acts magnanimously;

her actions are her words.

She plays the role of that tenth leper, who throws herself at Jesus  
feet in a devoted act of gratitude on behalf of her brother.

She breaks open the costly spikenard, and pours it out onto Jesus' feet,  
and then spreads it around with her hair,  
and the house is filled with the odor.

Mary is humble, but she is extravagant.

Her engagement with Jesus is beyond thought.

She is silent, but her bending, breaking, pouring, spreading  
are like *believing out loud*.

She is focused upon Jesus,  
caring not one wit what others might think.

Poet Mary Oliver says,

*All summations have a beginning, all effect has a story,  
all kindness begins with the sown seed.*

*Thought buds toward radiance.*

*The gospel of light is the crossroads of- indolence, or action.*

*Be ignited, or be gone.*

(Mary Oliver. "What I Have Learned So Far". *New and Selected Poems*)

Mary is ignited. She pours it all out. She loves without reservation  
or inhabitation.

She christens Jesus' for his triumphal march to his own death, and beyond.

Mary pours out perfume, a sign of something much deeper.

What other kinds of things are poured out in God's Kingdom, I wonder?

What biblical tradition does she reflect, does she re-member,

as she bends to serve her Lord with full-bodied heart, soul, and strength?

In the Old Testament, when God's wrath is poured out as a result of  
Israel's disobedience or idolatry (2 Chron. 34: 21, Jer. 7:20)

Israel responds with blood and oil that is poured out,

and drink-offerings, libations and ashes that are poured out,  
as sacrifices to appease an angry God (Gen. 35:14, Deut 12:27).

Other things are poured out, too:

sighs, groanings, souls, and selves are poured out in prayer (Psalms);  
prayers themselves are poured out (Isaiah 26: 16);  
and lifeblood and life are poured out as a result of Israel's disobedience.

But two exceptions stand out in the Old Testament.

In the song of love unknown, *The Song of Songs*,

the beloved woman lavishes the object of her affection  
with this effusive accolade:

"Your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you." (1:3)

And in the book of *Joel*, a new twist occurs as the Lord proclaims

a resuscitation of Judah in the days to come;  
a time beyond the days of darkness and locusts,  
and desolation and stench.

The Lord says, "then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;

your sons and your daughter shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28)

And then in the days of Jesus, in the days of the New Covenant,

foreshadowed now by Mary's overflow of grace,  
Christ's blood will be poured out, for many,  
for the forgiveness of sin (Matt. 26:28) ;

the promised Holy Spirit will be poured out upon all,  
even the Gentiles (Acts 10: 45);

and God's servants will pour themselves out  
in sacrificial offering of the faith in which they rejoice (Phil. 2:17) .

Some in the room want to criticize Mary for her gushing show of affection;

for her remembrance and foreshadowing of God's outpouring  
of wondrous, redemptive love that turns lives around.  
It's embarrassing, for one, when people become so effusive with their faith.

"Mary, where are your manners?"

It turns us all into bitter Michals, the wife of King David,  
who rankled as her husband danced naked with joy before the Lord  
when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem.

"David, have you forgotten who you are?"

It turns us all into resentful eldest sons, like the prodigal's brother,  
who winced as his father abandoned all paternal decorum  
and ran helter skelter to embrace and kiss his long-lost son.

"Dad, how dare you behave like a simpleton?"

*Be ignited, or be gone*, the poet advocates, the Gospel implores.

Pour yourselves out in myriads of ways:

in cups of coffee shared, in miles traveled to visit,  
in tears shed in shared grief, in flowers given as tokens,  
in glitter spread too thick on a hand-made card,  
in stitches knitted into prayer shawls,  
in words written or texted to reconcile, in meals served to the homeless,  
in songs practiced and rehearsed to God's glory,  
in pennies hoarded and miles walked for the hungry,  
in crockpots filled with soup for the Knauerts.

Err on the side of caring. Risk "too much", rather than "not enough".

*Be ignited, or be gone.*

No miracle happens without a witness. Someone to declare.

Someone has to act and to believe out loud in order for things to change.  
Last week I attended a class at Columbia Seminary on Prayer in Many Forms.  
One of the participants in our class, a shy young man from California,  
raised his hand to give testimony to his experience of prayer.

He started off in measured words, only hinting at the circumstances  
surrounding his prayer, his outpouring of prayer, as it turned out.  
An addict, he said he was, at the end of his rope, praying fervently  
to God to take his life, and thus to end his addiction.  
He wanted things to change, alright. He wanted them to change by taking  
himself out of this world.  
But Jesus came to him in a vision, he said, in the middle of his outpouring.  
And the Jesus who came to him was not the Sunday School variety Jesus,  
not the meek and mild Jesus, not the robed in white Jesus,  
not the suffer the little children Jesus,  
but the beaten, scourged, speared, tortured, naked, nailed Jesus,  
who stood by him and said simply,  
“I don’t want you to die. I’ve already done that for you. I want you to live.”  
And the young man cried as he told his story; tears poured out of his eyes.  
And it was uncomfortable being in the room with him,  
because he was so raw in his emotions, so vulnerable in the act,  
as I’m sure it was uncomfortable for the disciples to be  
in the same room with Mary during her outpouring of passion.  
But for this young man, this addict, life changed at that point, in that prayer,  
during that outpouring, in that vision. Life took a u-turn.  
A way appeared at the dead end of his life; streams sprung up in his wasteland;  
wild animals, jackals and owls began to howl;  
and God began to do a new thing with his life.  
And I wish every addict could hear his story, because it is a story of supernatural  
transformation that comes to us from a loving God through prayer.  
And it is a story that he didn’t mean to tell, but that simply gushed forth  
from him, poured out from him, because he could not contain it,  
because it wasn’t his story...  
because it was God’s story looking for an outlet.

There are plenty of threats to our testimony, to our outpourings of love  
outside the faith.

There's an orange alert outside every door that says,  
"Don't you dare say those things around here. Keep your mouths shut!  
Keep your preaching and your politics to yourself!  
People will make plans to kill you  
for saying and doing things like that.

They'll report you for preaching social justice from the pulpit. "

There are plenty of threats to our full-bodied testimony,  
to our outpourings of love out there.

But the embarrassment or the discomfort from the inside, from us,  
should not serve as a deterrent to God's testimony springing up  
at the most inopportune times.

Because it will. Because it can't stay suppressed for long.

Because God is constantly doing a new thing, and bringing  
about change that is forgiving, life-giving, and  
second-chance bringing.

Because God is incessantly looking for an outlet  
to bear witness to HIS own outpouring of love.

God has poured out his wondrous love for us in the sacrifice of his Son,  
Jesus, the gift, the game-changer, the prayer answer,  
the Lamb and the Shepherd, the guest and the host.

How can we help but pour out our love in response?

Too much or too costly should never be our concern.

Watch Mary. Listen to the poet.

*Be ignited, or be gone! Amen!*