

Darkness and Light by Muriel Lipp

When I came into this sanctuary four weeks ago and saw the dark curtains over the windows, the shades drawn, and candles extinguished, I thought, "Wow, this is really Lent in all its darkness." However, I grew accustomed to it. However, I will be glad when Easter comes, and I can again see the birds on the wires—and *sunlight*.

The scriptures for today are much more positive than those of past Lenten Sundays. In Isaiah, God tells us, "Behold, I am doing a new thing." Light.

Psalm 126 says, "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." Again, light.

In Philippians, Paul tells us to forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. I assume he means that what lies ahead is light. A good kind of light.

However, the scene where Mary, at her home with Martha and Lazarus, washes Jesus' feet with nard, an expensive perfume, then wipes his feet with her hair, is not so simple. He tells her to save what is left to anoint him at his burial. How did he know he was going to die? Could he feel it because of how he was being treated by the temple authorities, or did God somehow communicate this to him? We Christians assume he was sent by God; so was this instilled in him at birth?

Other Gospels have accounts of this story, but they are different. In both Matthew and Mark, this anointing takes place at the home of Simon the leper. The woman is not named Mary—just a woman with an alabaster jar. She anoints Jesus' head, not his feet. Luke describes the woman as a "sinner," meaning a prostitute.

Those who watched the anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary must have been astonished. However, Jesus sees through her act to her intent, which is love. He judged people by intent. What about Judas' response: the money from the perfume could have been saved and given to the poor? Jesus responded: "Let her alone. Let her keep it for my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." It is hard to reject Judas' words, if his concern is for the poor, but in the John reading, this is questionable. For Jesus, love is the central theme of his mission.

Much has been written recently about Judas. Several writers have said that he got a bum rap, but whatever is the truth, Judas carried this judgment throughout the centuries. We cannot know the details of these acts and relationships. Facts are denied us, but Truth remains. I think this anointing is an act of love. Deep truth. Regardless of the response of Judas in this Gospel

Though it is an act of love, we know that Good Friday is to follow. Therefore, in this foot washing there is a glimmering of darkness of the deepest, cruelest kind. Then Easter follows that. Light. Not the glaring light we sought to escape on the first Sunday of Lent, but a light that lasts. And gives. And grows.

We are in that between time now: a time of darkness with promise of light.

This story of Mary washing Jesus' feet reminds me of our Seekers Maundy Thursday service. We will celebrate it in a week and a half. As a child, I grew up among Mennonites and Amish, who practiced foot washing. Nevertheless, my church, an Evangelical and Reformed congregation, did not. So when Seekers began our foot-washing services on Maundy Thursday some years ago, I felt ill at ease. This was something new. Could I let someone take my foot, immerse it in warm water, gently caress it and dry it with a warm towel? Could I do the

same to another? What did it mean? Was it love, as with Mary and Jesus? Over the years, I have come to care about this ritual. Yes, it is love, the intention of love—expressed to a body part from one soul to another. Then the sharing of food afterward—food familiar to Jesus. Please put it on your calendar if you want to experience this. Not everyone does.

However, the ritual we celebrate on Maundy Thursday is not a replay of Mary washing Jesus' feet. It is a reference to Jesus washing his disciples' feet. This occurred just before the Last Supper, when Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another. The word Maundy is descended from the Latin "mandatum," the word for command.

Love one another.

It is interesting that these two examples of foot washing occur so close together in the Gospel of John. It is clear that cleansing is not the main reason for the washing of feet, but as Jesus so often expresses, an act is a metaphor for a larger truth. These metaphors have a way of growing into rituals. In both of these examples, love is the real meaning of the foot washing.

Why feet? The Bible is filled with references to feet. Clearly, feet meant more in those days, when they were the primary means of transportation. My Yoga teacher says feet are the most neglected parts of our bodies, and she puts us through all sorts of toe, arch and ankle stretches and urges us to wear shoes that are kind to our feet. Thank God for these wonderful body parts that do so much for us, and thank your feet for carrying you where you want to go.

Recently I attended a Jewish funeral. Ed's cousin died in his sleep at the age of 98 in New York City. He had named Ed and a lawyer friend to be co-executors. I did not know what to expect. Darkness? Light? Our daughters were adamant that we not drive, as there was a prediction of snow. As those of you

know who have parents our age, our loving children become our parents at such times. We listened to them and took Amtrak. There were six people at the funeral, plus the rabbi, who led us in a simple service of psalms and prayers in English, Hebrew and Aramaic. I remembered that Jesus spoke Aramaic. After the ceremony at the funeral home, we rode to the cemetery in a limousine. The burial took place after a harried journey from Manhattan to Queens (taxicabs whizzing around us). We stopped at the cemetery office for Ed and the other executor to sign some legal papers there. I remained in the limousine with the rabbi, and we conversed. Around us were tombstones with Jewish names and symbols.

The rabbi, who was a very warm person, asked me about my faith. I told him I was a Christian, a member of the ecumenical Seekers Church in Washington, descended from the parent Church of the Saviour. He said, "Saviour—then you believe that the Messiah has come?"

"Yes," I said, "we believe that Jesus is the Messiah."

"We," he said, "are still waiting."

Somehow, this was a transforming moment for me. To be able to talk about differences—and honor them. Nevertheless, what he said made me wonder: Though the Gospels are filled with examples of Jesus being called the Anointed (which in Greek is Christos) or Christ—was Jesus ever, at any point in his life himself looking for a Messiah? When did he begin to know that he was It? He was intimately acquainted with God and performed miracles, and he attracted people in huge numbers. Yet many of the Jewish authorities rejected him, as my rabbi acquaintance did. ("We are still waiting.")

Jesus was a person of light who used metaphors, similes and parables for his language—the language of poets—when many of the religious authorities of his time expressed their faith in rules, regulations and traditions. The Hebrew Scriptures are

very important to us. They are our history. They contain the longings and the predictions of the coming of the Messiah. Also, the beautiful language of the Psalms. We think the Messiah has come. Jews of today are still waiting. There must have been many questions back then. How hard it must have been for those first- and second-century Jewish Christians to break away from their families and synagogues and follow Jesus, who saw faith in God as a thing of intentional love.

I am sure many Christians would be sympathetic to Judas's remark: Why not give the money from the expensive perfume to the poor? Most churches give money to the poor. One of my reasons for attachment to Seekers is that our involvement with the poor asks that we be involved with our money. Not just gifts, but ourselves, the givers, along with the gifts. Though it is pride to brag about the way we do things, I do like that we demand going along with our gifts. The other Sunday, when Jackie and Jean shared this pulpit, telling about their experiences with the Bokamoso young people, both here and in Winterveldt, South Africa, I was moved. In the meeting afterward, when so many of us jumped in to continue to help, I felt a deep YES within me. Then my reflections on Roy Barber's quiet involvement over the years with these poor South African youths made me say a larger YES. In fact, Roy is over there right now, along with students from St. Andrew's School. Involvement, intention, light in darkness. Love.

Then there is Guatemala. And Mississippi. To say nothing about the giving going on now in our own city.

In our world today, we see so many glitzy kinds of love: Love of possessions, the idolizing of celebrities, and—worst of all—failing to see the need for love under our noses. I look back at my own life, and I must confess that I also am guilty of failing to love those who pulled at me to love them—classmates or neighbors rejected by everyone, occasional handicapped persons who could not keep up with the crowd, the ill who would have appreciated visits from me. Therefore, in

turning away from the pulling to love, I turned away from the light. Thomas Merton calls this "the rejection of disinterested love."

Worst of all, the Christian Church has, throughout its history, been a bad example of how to love. Though there are many good examples of love by the Church—which is why we choose to be members of it—we can't forget the Crusades, the torture and killing of martyrs, and our complicity in wars too numerous to mention. Then the Holocaust, carried out by many who called themselves Christians. In the area of Pennsylvania where I grew up, there are many persons descended from Pietists in Germany. They came to this country because they had learned that the Quaker William Penn welcomed persons of all faiths, whereas in Germany in the 1700s, the conventional churches rejected them because of their beliefs, primarily their practice of adult baptism by immersion, the wearing of plain clothes, and pacifism. I too rejected them as a young person because I had two brothers in World War II. Like Judas in our John Gospel, I saw narrowly instead of deeply.

Love is more a doing that springs from being, and Jesus exemplified that. Mary, washing his feet with expensive perfume, was witnessing to what she learned from him. Love in its purest form is an expression of involvement, intimacy and truth.

At our silent retreat at Dayspring, coming up in April, we hope to look deeply into the large pullings of our faith. This is an opportunity to ponder more deeply how God speaks to us, what our commitments mean to us. In the silence we often see signs, have dreams, experience synchronous moments that seem to be the way God communicates. God is mystery, and though I sometimes would like to scream at him/her, "Come down and tell me who and how you are," mostly I love the mystery. Though I believe the April retreat is filled, and there is a waiting list, another retreat will be held in the fall. Think about spending a silent weekend with God, listening to whatever

there is for you to hear, see and feel.

Let me close with my favorite psalm, No. 139:

God, you have examined me and known me,

whether I sit down or rise up; you have discerned my thoughts
from afar.

You have traced my journey and my resting places,

and are acquainted with all my ways.

There is not a word on my tongue, but you, God,

know them all.

You have kept close guard before me and behind.

You have spread your hand over me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me—

so high I cannot reach it.

Where can I escape from your presence?

If I climb to heaven, you are there;

If I make my bed in hell, again I find thee.

If I take my flight to the frontiers of the morning

or dwell in the limits of the western sea,

even there your hand will meet me

and your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely darkness will steal over me,

night will close around me,"

darkness is no darkness for you

and night is bright as day;

to you both dark and light are one.

You it was who fashioned my inward parts;
You did knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will praise you, for you fill me with awe;
wonderful you are, and wonderful your works.

You know me through and through;

my body is no mystery to you,

how I was secretly kneaded into shape
and patterned in the depths of the earth.

you saw my limbs unformed in the womb,
and in your book they are all recorded;

day by day they were fashioned,
not one of them was late in growing.

How deep are your thoughts, O God,
how inexhaustible your themes!

Can I count them?

They outnumber the grains of sand...Amen