

Kate Cudlipp: What is Given and What is Asked

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

What is Given and What is Asked

This is the beginning of Holy Week, a time to pay attention to the events of that climactic and world-changing week and to see the connections between those extraordinary events and the "ordinary" challenges in our own lives and times.

Then

We will begin by paying attention to a few of the players in the story of Christ's passion. First, let us go to the end of the story and look at the centurion who stood guard over Jesus. Seeing how he died, the centurion declared, "Surely this was God's Own!" We know nothing more about the centurion, but the narrative leads us to believe that something in him changed because of his paying close attention to the one he was helping crucify. How many others were witnesses and saw only what they expected to see: another "enemy of the people" dispatched? Like the photographs on exhibit at a museum in New York recently with pictures of lynchings in this country in the early part of the twentieth century: the crowds were festive, celebrating the "just desserts" of those they could not see as human.

Now let's jump back to the beginning of the passion narrative in today's lectionary and look at the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany. We know nothing about the woman other than that she had the means to purchase an expensive jar of perfume –

which cost the equivalent of a year's wages for a laborer. She was not an invited guest – because women did not eat with men at such gatherings – and was probably neither a serving person nor a woman there for the entertainment of the males guests, the only usual reasons women would be in attendance. She bursts onto the scene in a rather startling fashion.

We cannot know specifically what motivated her, but her act is so focused and sure that it is not much of a stretch to think that she had been paying attention to the person, Jesus, and that she was impelled to act from what she had observed. Her literal outpouring of the expensive perfume symbolized the outpouring of her spirit on this person she must have known was, in some way, a key to her own wholeness. She responded wholly, lavishly, without reservation, as she broke the jar and used its entire contents in the anointing, saving none for her own future use.

Finally, in this Holy Week journey, let us look at the central figure, Jesus, at the pivotal point on his road to Good Friday. We entered the centurion's story at the moment he saw with "magic eyes" and can only guess the consequences of that new vision. We were allowed to see the powerful consequences, but not the motivation, of the woman's attention to the person, Jesus, and we marveled at the certainty she exhibited in actions that were costly to her. Looking at Jesus in Gethsemane, we see, in full view, the transformative power of paying attention to – listening for – the voice of God.

When Jesus withdraws from his disciples, the gospel of Mark tells us he "was very distressed and troubled." The Greek words used to describe Jesus' state of mind are very powerful. One scholar has translated them as Jesus' being struck by the "utmost degree of unbounded horror and suffering." Jesus asks that God deliver him from what he could see coming toward him. This is not hard to understand when we look at what Jesus had reason to expect might be his fate: crucifixion. Listen to this description of what Jesus' likely suffered after being

condemned:

Pilate gave the order. Crucifixion waited. The legal preparation for crucifixion was scourging. The person was stripped naked, tied to a column and whipped with a flagrum – a whip with pieces of sheep bone and metal tied into it...And so they whipped [Jesus], and bone and metal met skin with a crash. Waves of pain shot through his body to his brain. His back and legs took on the appearance of ground meat. Each lash grabbed and gouged him – and he began to die.

The cross beam, the patibulum, weighing over one hundred pounds was tied to his raw screaming shoulders. Splinters and corners tore into his skin and under guard he was led the short distance to that hill.

That hill – only about one third of a mile away. Too far, too far. He falls once, his face smashed on the rough cobblestones under the weight of the patibulum. Again he falls and still again. "We've got to get help! He's going to die here! We're to crucify him! You, get this cross." It is untied from Jesus' shoulders and given to the Cyrene. Jesus is lifted to his feet and pushed onward.

The hill, Golgotha. The place of the skulls. The stipes – vertical pieces of dead wood – stand waiting for the patibuli and their victims...

His right hand – that once beautiful carpenter's hand – is stretched onto the wood. The nail is ready and quickly driven through his wrist. His thumb strikes his palm wildly, for the median nerve has been hit. Then the other hand is fixed and he is lifted onto the stipes and attached there with a nail.

The long ordeal begins. The weight of his body pulls on his hands. Soon cramps grab his arms and his whole body. His face turns violet, then blue. He is suffocating. Only by lifting himself can he get his breath. But this sends shocks of pain through his arms and his crown is pushed further into his

head as he leans back on the patibulum. The other two men are screaming, cursing raging. The taunts of the passers-by and the authorities sneak into his consciousness between screams of pain...

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

(from *Understanding the Human Jesus* by Andrew Canale, pp. 183-184)

Therefore, it is not hard to understand that Jesus asked God to deliver him from such suffering, from deep humiliation and from abandonment by those closest to him. "Let it be not my will but your will." Moreover, *please* let it be your will that I not have to go through this! That is how we see Jesus as he begins his time of paying attention in Gethsemane.

At the end of his time alone he is able to say to his sleepy disciples, "The hour is upon us – the Chosen One is being handed into the clutches of evildoers. Get up, let's go. Here comes my betrayer!" Jesus has listened, he has paid attention to what God asks of him and understands that something far more valuable than his human well-being is at stake in what he chooses to do. Moreover, we do not see him look back again or seek dispensation from what is to come.

Now

Have you realized yet that this sermon is about stewardship? Because stewardship in its fullest meaning is about how we live the lives that are given us. Stewardship is about the quality of attention we pay to what is given *to* us and what is asked *of* us. That is what we have been looking at in the passion story. We saw what the centurion was given – a glimpse of the Divine. We do not know what all might have been asked of him afterward. We saw what was called forth from the nameless woman who will be remembered wherever the Good News

is proclaimed. Moreover, most powerfully, in a class by itself, we saw what God asked of Jesus and how Jesus heard and responded.

Unless we first know what we have and what we have to give others and all creation, we cannot be good stewards. Nevertheless, stewardship does not end with paying attention; it begins there. We may know what we have been given. We may know what is needed from us, but being able to say, "Yes" to what is asked is, I believe, a gift from God. There is too much "stuff" in our way to let us, by dint of our own will, respond fully to what is asked of us.

Look at the disciples. They saw what was asked – that they stand by their Lord. However, they could not be the stewards they wanted to be, the stewards they had promised to be. They turned down the invitation. They failed the test. They ran.

That, of course, is not the end of their story. After Pentecost, they moved out into the world to bear witness. Tradition says that some were, themselves, crucified. Others were stoned. Something enabled them to see where true-life lay and that the barriers to that life were surmountable.

We Seekers are not presently, as far I know, being asked to undergo martyrdom. However, stewardship is not only about the biggest things in life. In a parable Jesus tells about stewardship, the master says to two servants who have been trustworthy with the small opportunities given them that more will be offered. We practice stewardship in all aspects of our lives.

We have many opportunities to practice stewardship in this community, and we have a particularly noticeable one in front of us at this time: preparing a place for our life together and our ministries at Carroll Street. This is both a collective opportunity and an individual one. We are in the process of discerning together what we want to go on in that

building and what we want to see coming out of it, as gift and resource to the world. Determining what we want to do there is half the work of envisioning who we want to become. The other half is determining how much of our lives and resources we will put into doing that work. Both of these are aspects of stewardship and must be developed together, and the collective discernment must go hand in hand with individual discernment by each one of us.

I am praying that what may seem like an unappealing task – figuring out how much money we will contribute to this new venture, this new phase of our life together – will become an opportunity to look more deeply at ourselves as stewards of what has been given us.

For many of us, looking at finances is not something we choose to do unless compelled. It is demanding and potentially threatening. It means doing some hard work to figure out how much we really have. This is the first part of paying attention. We can do this on our own, if we choose to, but it is hard. It may mean sorting out what are "wants" as opposed to "needs," figuring out what is important in life, setting priorities. Moreover, it may mean facing into our lives without guarantees that we will always have what we need. Isn't this spirit-work?

This is what we are being called to in the stewardship work around Carroll Street. It is not only about the building but about who we want to be as Seekers. The work that I do now, because decisions about the building are pending, will also help me think about how I will respond to other needs that come to me from the community – needs of individual Seekers, needs of the ministries we support. The work for others of you may reveal that you need to ask the community for more – something our popular culture does not encourage.

The work will be different for each of us, but we all need to do it. The stewardship task group has been working to prepare

some materials for use by all Seekers. We have a short set of questions to help you think about your relation to Seekers with respect to personal and financial resources. We also have a sheet you can work with to get a good picture of your personal or family wealth – your assets. We are not soliciting pledges at this point because we want the other, more important work to come first. *If* we do the earlier work, the pledge stage will be a natural outgrowth. At least that is the hope and prayer. It is not the amount of one's contribution but the spirit work that leads up to it that ultimately matters.

We do not have a specific process that we expect everyone to engage. We encourage everyone to find a way that is challenging – and helpful – for you to do this work. I know that many of us will be tempted to say that we are just too busy to get into this. I encourage you to take what time you can – to make time – to work on this, recognizing that this is not a one-time exercise but can lay groundwork for how we understand and relate to our material resources for the rest of our lives.

The stewardship group is proposing that every Seeker choose at least one other person to meet with to talk about the issues that this work raises for you. We will propose that Seekers stewards check with the members that they are shepherding to see whether and/or how members are able to carry out this invitation. Stewards will be asked through their mission groups how they are responding. There are no check lists, no gold stars, no demerits, just the sense that bringing our money fears and uncertainties into the light is one step toward freeing us from the life-stifling darkness in which we often keep them.

It is the negative side of darkness that permeates Holy Week. Jesus had to confront that darkness before the light of resurrection was possible. Each of us, in fear and trembling, must walk our own path toward wholeness. We are not alone, but

no one else can walk it for us or tell us what we must do to arrive. Our relationship to money is not incidental to our spiritual health; it is central. I pray that we will find in this Holy Week an invitation to understand in new ways the power money has for good and ill in our lives. In addition, I pray that we will be given, from somewhere beyond ourselves, the clarity to know and the ability to choose the good.

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Thinking About Stewardship

As we begin to determine what we will spend to make Carroll Street a home for Seekers, it is a good time for each of us to examine the stewardship of our financial and personal resources related to the community. To help each person do this, the Stewardship Group suggests that you work with the following questions:

1. How much time do I spend, on average, in Seekers' community activities or work, e.g., worship, mission group, Sunday school, other meetings, etc.? What percentage is this of my waking hours?
2. How much am I contributing now to the Seekers' budget? What percentage is this of my income?
3. Do my expenditures of time, energy and money accurately reflect the importance I place on being part of Seekers?
4. Do I want/expect my expenditure of time, energy and money with respect to Seekers to change with the preparation for, and move to, Carroll Street? If so, how?

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Worksheet for Assessing Wealth

As this is an assessment of financial wealth, all values should reflect equity rather than market value. A printable copy of this worksheet is also available.

Real Estate

Home

Second

Home

Other

Real

Estate

Subtotal: _____

Vehicles

Automobile(s)/other transportation (motorcycles, boats, horses, etc)

Subtotal: _____

Household furnishings

Art

Antiques

The Stewardship Group invites you to work with stewardship in a fresh way with our common investment in the renovation of Seekers' new home at Carroll Street. We are hoping that the process will be a rewarding one for all of us. We are aware that church "building campaigns" or "fundraising drives" may have negative connotations for many Seekers. We want the entire community to see the process as a spiritual undertaking and hope everyone will be able to share the faith-based assumption that what we raise will be enough to do the work needed.

We are embarking on a two-step process: first we are asking ourselves, using the "Statement of Support" being distributed today, to consider one-time gifts and increases in our regular giving. With that information in hand, we will offer the opportunity for Seekers who can to make loans to the church. Our financial target is "a Spirit-led sense of the right amount for each of us to give."

We are suggesting that you pick another Seeker as a partner with whom to share your reflections in order to bring to light whatever issues may arise as you look at your relationship with money and with Seekers. We hope that by being asked to pick someone you trust, you will feel free to share as much or as little as you are spiritually able, knowing your partner will not be judging you, either for what you share or how much you share. Members of the Stewardship Group would be happy to partner with anyone who asks us.

We will hold a community meeting on the stewardship aspects of our move on May 23, and will be collecting responses to the "Statement of Support" on Sunday, June 4. We hope that all of us will arrive at that day feeling more confident about our relation to money and to Seekers than we do today.

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My/Our Statement of Support for Seekers Life at Carroll Street

The time has come to see what resources will be available to make 272-278 Carroll Street a home for Seekers. The spiritual work that each Seeker or Seekers family does to fill in this statement is of most importance. The written responses will tell the community what resources we have to work with in making Carroll Street a place for us to continue our lives and work together. The Stewardship Group prays that this will be good work for each of us and for Seekers.

Financial Support

I will make a one-time gift of \$ _____.

(This could be given at one time or over several months.)

I will increase my weekly giving by \$ _____ per week.

Other Support

I will be willing to offer other help like _____

Signature