

April 7, 2019 John 12:1-8
Cultivating Meaningful Work: Letting Go of Self-Doubt and "Supposed To"
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John 12:1-8 The Message

Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces." He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them. Jesus said, "Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me."

I wonder when you meet someone new how often it takes you to ask this question: What do you do? We want to know what someone does because it helps us connect with them. It helps us know if we will have anything in common, maybe they know someone who works at our same company or is also a teacher. When we know what someone does, it helps to define them, it helps us to put them in a certain box. The truth is all of us are a lot of different things. Our answers to "what do you do?" are complicated. There are a lot of things that we do that make up who we are.

From when I started seminary, or preacher school as I like to call it, to when I was ordained as an Elder in the United Methodist Church took 10 years. But, I have a secret to tell you. I didn't pass my ordination interviews the first time. My daughter Madeleine was 6 months old so I was sleep deprived, and I didn't really treat the interview like an interview. Looking back I treated it more like a therapy session. I waited while I was voted on, and then I was shuffled into a room where a kind pastor told me that I was like a beautiful tapestry that unraveled itself. I'm not sure exactly what he meant, but I knew it was not good.

I had been with the same people for three years during my residency. We had met together every month and talked about our joys and our sorrows. They were my friends. I watched from the last row in the balcony during their ordination service as Bishop Moncure sat on a stool and washed their feet. I couldn't stop crying. Then I had to go back to the church in Krum, Texas where I was their pastor and tell them that I didn't pass. I had gotten feedback from my ordination interview that I was not confident. Failing your ordination interview does not make you more confident! I had to go back and tell my church that I failed and yet I was still their pastor. I loved these people and God loved them and I loved being their pastor. But it was not time for me to get my feet washed. I had to wait.

Theologian Howard Thurman says, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." We are going to find meaning in our lives when we open ourselves up to the gifts that we have. We all have gifts and talents that we can share with the world. When we share those gifts, we create a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. It is so easy to give into our doubt, we feel like everyone else has special gifts except for us. We let our fear and our self-doubt undermine our faith in God and in ourselves. The next year I did pass my ordination interview. Maybe because I treated it like an interview. Maybe because I tried to be more confident. Maybe because they felt sorry for me. Maybe because I was willing to share the gifts that I have with those on the Board of Ordained Ministry. I don't know, but when Bishop Moncure sat down on the stool and washed my feet at my ordination service on June 6, 2006, or 6-6-06 as one of my friends joked, I felt humbled and privileged. I didn't realize that Bishop Moncure had a brain tumor while he washed

my feet and he tragically passed away two months later. I still have the towel that he used to dry my feet. The moment when Bishop Moncure washed my feet was and continues to be a major event in my life. Such a simple thing with so much meaning.

We are in the season of Lent as we count down to Easter. It is this time of spiritual gardening, of inviting God to unearth in us what needs to be tended, and what needs to die for new life to emerge. We have been thinking about what we can cultivate in our lives and what we need to let go of. How can we cultivate meaningful work and let go of self-doubt and “supposed to” in our lives? Are there places we can make a true impact like Bishop Moncure did in my life?

In our scripture, Mary was doing something that was meaningful to her. She uses this costly fragrance to anoint Jesus’ feet. She doesn’t say anything as she does it, she just does it. Jesus is being loved with a grace upon grace kind of love, an abundance of love, a love that you could smell, with a fragrance that would linger for days.¹

Judas’ is very concerned because the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. We get this aside that Judas wanted to steal the money. Mary wastes this expensive perfume on Jesus. Maybe it was because she was grateful that Jesus had brought her brother Lazarus back to life. We don’t know. We do know that Jesus simply receives her gift with gratitude. It was meaningful. It was a gift, freely given and freely received. Can we learn from Mary?

We get it into our heads that we’re supposed to care about money, not meaning. I want to get rid of “supposed to” from my vocabulary. “Supposed to” is about fitting in, perfectionism, people-pleasing, and proving ourselves. I don’t want to be about “supposed to”. What is on your “supposed to” list? Maybe that you have to be in a certain profession or make a certain amount of money? Maybe that you have to work until you are 65. Maybe that you have to act a certain way or dress a certain way. Who says? Why? I want to encourage you to write your “supposed to” down and acknowledge them so that you can see that yes, you are afraid of this, but you are going to do it anyway.

I want to invite you to think about what inspires you? What is something that you love doing? What brings meaning to you? It might be reading to a young child and there isn’t any money in that but you know that it brings you joy and it fills your heart.

Mary washed Jesus’ feet. She used the best oil that she had. Washing feet is what we do as followers of Jesus. We sit down on a stool, and we listen. We serve. We bring our best oil to the task at hand. At the end of the scripture, Jesus says, “You always have the poor with you.” It doesn’t seem like the most sensitive thing to say. Maybe Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy 15:11, “Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That’s why I’m giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land” (Common English Bible).

When you have financial resources, it is easy to feel like you don’t need Jesus. Having money changes the way that we view ourselves and our need for Jesus. But our technology, our money, our homes, our cars, and our comforts don’t fill the void that Christ fills in our lives. We are in need of salvation from ourselves. A wealthy woman was talking to John Wesley, the first Methodist. She told him that she read Scripture every day. She prayed every day. She did all of this stuff to grow closer to God. She wanted to know what else she needed to become fully Christian. John Wesley told her to go and visit those in prison. He told her to go and visit those in the hospital. He said the call of Jesus was to self-denial and humility and leaving our comfort zones to reach out to people who are in a different situation than ours. John Wesley was telling

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5309>

her to go and wash the feet of those in need using the best oil she had. Jesus looks after those who are in need. If we follow Christ, we have to do the same thing. Washing feet is meaningful work.

This story is a reminder for all of us that every day we are invited to be with Jesus. We are invited to be with Jesus at the communion table. We are invited to be with Jesus in extravagant acts of compassion and generosity. We are invited to be with Jesus as we worship God. We are so blessed because God is a God of abundance. Mary's extravagant love for Jesus makes it possible for Jesus to show extravagant love in what follows for him as he washes the feet of his disciples, then he hands himself over to be arrested in the garden. It gives him the strength to carry his own cross, die on Good Friday, rises on Easter, and ascend to heaven.²

Mary loved Jesus into his future. We need to be loved into our future sometimes. When our future seems uncertain or when our future may mean suffering. There will always be people who think that love is unnecessary. That it is wasteful, that we are better off fending for ourselves by ourselves, alone. There is a great Hezekiah Walker song that Mark Miller sings called, "I Need You to Survive." "I need you, you need me, we're all a part of God's body. Stand with me, agree with me, we're all a part of God's body. It is God's will that every need be supplied. You are important to me, I need you to survive. I'll pray for you, you pray for me, I love you, I need you to survive. I won't harm you with words from my mouth, I love you, I need you to survive."

Real strength comes from trusting in the faithfulness of others. I believe with you, you believe with me. We help each other to believe. We believe for each other when it is hard to believe. We need one another. We need people to remind us that when God seems far away, we only need to look inside and see that God lives within us. When we share our gifts and talents with the world, we feel connected to God. May God help us all to find meaningful work so when we are asked the question "what do you do?", we can answer that we wash feet.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5309>