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## Meditation 2: Gift

*"And a woman in the city, who was a sinner ... brought an alabaster jar of ointment, and ... continued to kiss his feet and anoint them." (Luke 7:37)*

In the first of these meditations, I spoke about an invitation: the invitation to the days of Passion, of the choice laid before us by Jesus recalling Isaiah's great vision of a vineyard made for love which has been despoiled by sin. I spoke of Jesus's stark and still unexpected warning that to follow him back into that luscious vineyard where death now tragically awaits the Son of the owner, will involve an overturning of all reasonable, just expectations about rewards and punishments, for which those of us who long to keep our religion tidy still yearn, even now. I spoke of our inevitable resistance and aversion, therefore, to the costliness of what lies before us if we dare this year to step once more into that realm where all religious reason is reversed, where meaning is stopped and human control comes to the end of its resources.

Now, as we start to follow the gospels into the heart of this unfolding story, that question of costliness and loss of control becomes our first focus in the most striking fashion, and it comes in the form of an excessive and "costly" gift by a woman: a whole jar of expensive ointment wasted, and an exuberant expression of human

love and gratitude almost calculated to cause scandal and offence. We have already read the version of this story that comes fairly early in Luke's gospel, where the woman is explicitly described as a "sinner" but remains unnamed; but in all the other gospels (Mark and Matthew, where the woman also remains unidentified, and John, where she is said - very differently - to be Mary of Bethany, the contemplative sister of Martha and Lazarus) the incident occurs just as the very Passion starts to unfold. In other words, the majority scriptural tradition on this story has it that the Passion begins, most curiously and even embarrassingly (let us not beat around the bush), with a woman making a fool of herself.

An excessive gift of love and gratitude and obeisance opens the very door to the Passion. What are we to make of this? Let us reflect for a moment on this question of gift, its connection to gender, as the world knows it, and its integral relation to the logic of the Passion. In the matter of everyday gift, there is usually - even if somewhat unconsciously - a negotiation at stake. The anthropologists call it *do ut des* - that is, "I give to you (a box of chocolates, a job, a mortgage), in order that you give back to me (either now or later)." And therein lies an economy of exchange, which - some say - forms the basis of all stable communities. I know to whom I'm beholden - and so do you. I also know who deserves punishment when someone reneges on this gift - and so do you. We are engaged in a continual round of such negotiations, among individuals, families, colleagues, and indeed societies. According to many, it's what makes the world go around: gift and response, generosity and debt. We keep the accounts. And though it's a well-kept secret, by and large we like to run our religions this way, too, because it gives us at least some sense of control.

Note that in its more subtle forms, this type of exchange by no means rules out either generosity or discretion: on the contrary, I can tithe, and even tithe with modesty and secrecy, in this same spirit, in the sure confidence that I have thereby left some good credit in the divine accounting system. The Protestant reformation was, of course, an attempt to shatter this whole business altogether; but we may well ask, even now, if it fully succeeded - at least in our inmost hearts. But in such economies of exchange, as many have noted, it is women who do not obviously fit in very well. If they cannot join the game of exchange themselves as autonomous agents, or are even debarred from it (as was certainly true in the time of Jesus), there are seemingly only two options remaining to them. They may become themselves the objects of sexual barter, one of the main items of male exchange; or - at the other extreme - they may attempt to escape and even undermine the whole economy through an excessive form of gift, which is their very own. When a lover continues to be faithful to the memory of someone long lost, to pray for him even in rejection, we see this excess of gift; when a mother continues to love a son who is violent and lawless, we see it again. And when a woman of doubtful reputation, as in the gospel reading, flings herself bodily at a beloved in grief and gratitude, we know that the two poles of association (erotic and subversive) have paradoxically converged. Such an excess of gift leaves us with a deep sense of moral ambiguity, a suspicion that such love is nonsensical, damaging, potentially open to abuse, and

certainly outside the pale of sense and sensibility. As indeed it is. How striking it is then that Jesus, on the eve of his Passion, commends such an excessive and costly show of love. And he commends it, not only for what it irreducibly is - a gift beyond measure - but for what it ultimately bespeaks: the authentic human response to divine gift and forgiveness, a response to that supernatural gift that alone can finally break the hold of the worldly gift-exchange economy on our wills and imaginations.

Yet see how artfully he makes this point here in Luke, for he knows that in the company of this particular religious dinner party he can only make it in the familiar patterns of the pay-off matrix his offended interlocutors presume as basic. "Look," he says, "think of this in your terms, those of debt and return. Can't you see that she must have been let off some big payment if this is the result?" This initial ploy, however, is surely ironic, for Jesus then further chides his interlocutors: "Do you see this woman?" Look on her and learn if you want to know about divine gift. Do not shrink her action down into your logic, but let her explode your logic into her gift. Another problem still remains, however. It's the embarrassing one, the further recoil among the assembled party at the inescapably erotic overtones of the woman's action - those vivid reminders of sexual barter that also came with the worldly model of gift exchange, and threaten to drag this woman's performance instantly back into it again. For note the finer details that Luke supplies here again: this is not oil poured on the head, as in Matthew's and Mark's version of the story, as if to confirm Jesus's Messianic status; but oil to the feet - an act of extravagance and suggestiveness, as we know from parallel cases in the pagan world - from Aristophanes, from Pliny, from Petronius. And the hair is down, too, and flowing to mop up tears from the feet: the sexual evocations are surely unambiguous. But Jesus's fearlessness and poise in the face of such effusive intimacy is what strikes us here. It is as if, in commending such an excessive gift of love, he also points to an inner purity within it, to a place where erotic longing finds its true and final goal in the divine gift which it here meets. Theodore of Mopsuestia, writing in Syriac in the early fifth century, puts it thus, and with great beauty: "it was as if the woman planned this so as to attach the fragrance of our Lord's flesh to her body. For she took care that she should always be with him: she did this in her love so that if she should come to be separated from him, by this she could suppose he was with her still." The mingling of hair, oil, skin also bespeaks this pure gift beyond exchange. So when Jesus commends the woman here with such gentle loveliness ("Your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you") his answer can only mean that it is in our deepest experiences of human love, wrested to extremes and beyond all calculation, that we are first drawn into the meaning of the Passion. Indeed, here, with this excessive form of gift, we must start, if we are to tread this way. Men too, of course, also love with this sort of agony - although, in our culture of patriarchy, they hate to show it. But Jesus will show us with dominical power later this week how this can be, by extending this logic of a gift that exceeds all barter with his very own form of feet-washing, his very own form of intimate excess.

"And a woman in the city, who was a sinner ... brought an alabaster jar of ointment, and ... continued to kiss his feet and anoint them." This sweet fragrance of excessive

love is fully accepted by Jesus as he turns to face his own death. It is a gift of gratitude and grace, no less than of anguish and grief. And if we want to know the meaning of Passion, if we want to be mingled with Christ, as Theodore of Mopsuestia so beautifully put it, this we have to learn to do: it gives off a sweet fragrance that bespeaks all the costliness of love, and the desire for an intimacy beyond death.

We now stand in this lush fragrance of the ointment that reminds us again of the original vineyard of love: we step forward hesitantly, wondering what it will mean. We bring all our own excessive, broken, damaged and lost loves and we see anew, and with wonder, that Jesus accepts them; and not only accepts them but makes of them the necessary stuff of the opening of his Passion. Only Good Friday will show that, rightly understood, such excessive gift is not marginalized as "feminine," nor is it an invitation to abuse or be abused, nor even a misplaced form of idolatry, but rather a "deeper magic" beyond all human calculation, a divine rationality beyond all human reason. But for now we leave our own hopeless and excessive gifts of love, like wasted nard, at Jesus's feet, and wait for the unfolding of his new meaning. Amen.

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