

As we just passed the Ides of March last week I reread Julius Caesar, who did not Beware the Ides of March and was murdered March 15, 44 B.C. As always, Shakespeare delivers his usual keen insight into human nature – in this case the nature of real love.

After Caesar's death, Brutus is sorting out his rearranged relationships; those who are still love him after his assassination of Caesar, and those who have grown distant. Brutus asks Lucilius how a friend has reacted to him. Lucilius says, "*with courtesy and respect enough, but not with such familiar instances, not with such free and friendly conference, as he hath used of old.*" Brutus replies, "*Thou has described a hot friend cooling. Even note, Lucilius: when love begins to sicken and decay it useth an enforced ceremony.*"

Haven't you experienced that, on the giving and receiving end? When you are close to someone and then there is a rupture in your relationship and you both know it, it just becomes awkward. You don't really know how to make the transition from closeness to distance, so you use the forms of closeness (enforced ceremony) without the real heart and emotion in it (free and friendly conference.) Sometimes this takes the form of over-exuberance to cover up the awkwardness – "HEY! SO GREAT TO SEE YOU! SORRY I HAVEN'T CALLED! HOW ARE YOU?!"

Enforced ceremony, courtesy and respect are just not enough to sustain real love. There's nothing wrong with ceremony, courtesy and respect, of course. It's just when they are devoid of real substance they become useless or worse.

You can often see this dynamic played out in grandparent-grandchild relationships. You can tell the grandparents who light up when they see their grandchildren. They don't "babysit" – they just love to be with their grandchildren. You can usually tell the quality of real love between the grandparents and grandchildren by the goofiness of the grandparental names. Grown adults who delight in being called names like "Ging-Ging" and "Poo-Pa" are grandparents who are free and friendly with their grandchildren. Whatever the 2 year old names you is music to your ears.

I saw my one grandmother once a year at Thanksgiving. She was a very formal lady, whose visits required lots of enforced ceremony. We called her "Grandmother Walker". She did send me \$100 every Christmas, however, which in my mind more than compensated for the enforced ceremony!

In today's gospel we have a beautiful scene of real love expressed to Jesus. It is a free and friendly, unselfconscious kind of love. It is the kind of love that is not aware of anybody else, not aware of any rules or ceremony, not even aware of itself. It is

unmeditated; it's left hand does not know what it's right hand is doing. It is the kind of love that is only aware of it's object – Jesus Christ.

Mary expresses her love for Jesus in an extraordinary way. It's the kind of love, without which, Christianity is just a religion of form without power. Going to church is just an obligation. It's like kissing your sister. Unless your heart is totally involved with a kind of unselfconscious love, then it really is better just to bag it. I really mean that! I want you to come to church not out of enforced ceremony, but out of real love for God. This is the point of worship.

Mary show us what real love looks like. Martha and Mary are giving a dinner party in Jesus' honor. The occasion? He had just raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. It must have been happy and filled with extremely interesting conversation. *"So, uh, Lazarus, where exactly did you go while you were dead for 4 days? Did you happen to see Uncle Manny while you were there?" "So, Jesus, raised anybody else from the dead lately? My mother in law died last Tuesday, but no need to bother with her."*

So they were all reclining at the table as was the Jewish custom: a long low table, some pillows nearby, everybody eating and drinking, when a very strange thing happens. Martha is serving, of course. Mary disappears and returns with some perfume. Jesus would have been lying down, his head near the dinner table, his feet away. Mary comes and anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume. As she does, she breaches ceremony and creates "a big scene."

Now, why is this a scene? It was a normal part of Jewish hospitality to offer people some kind of aromatherapy as they came into your home because people generally smelled bad! Yet, this was a scene. The version of this story in Mark says that Mary was "harshly rebuked." Why?

The dinner party was totally disrupted because of Mary's expression of her love for Jesus. It was an embarrassing, over the top display. It was not "all things in moderation". Yet I think it is the essence of real love – desire rather than obligation.

What about her love makes it real? For one thing she doesn't count the cost. She gets the nard out of the family safe deposit box. This was the family heirloom. This was by far the most expensive thing that they owned. It probably represented 90 percent of their wealth. This *"pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard"* was their stock, their bond, their cd, their IRA, their trust fund, their life insurance, their health insurance, their inheritance and their legacy.

And what does Mary do? In the other gospel accounts, she breaks the jar open and dumps it all out over Jesus' head and then anoints his feet with the overflow. It's like taking a million dollars in cash and burning it in the fireplace to keep Jesus warm

Not only does Mary not count the cost, but her real love doesn't stand on her rights. Mary anoints Jesus' feet. This is an extremely demeaning act – like scrubbing toilets, only worse. Feet smelled. Feet still smell. A guy in my dorm in my first year used to put his shoes out in the hall because his roommate wouldn't allow them in their room. The problem is that the hall smelled terrible all the time.

Who wants to deal with somebody else's feet? Nobody. For instance in Biblical times, slaves had no rights. But, Jewish slaves did have one right. They were not forced to touch anyone's feet. That was too demeaning, even for a slave. So, what does Mary do at the dinner party? She surrenders her rights and anoints Jesus' feet.

Mary also doesn't care what anyone else thinks – another mark of real love. We know this because when Mary anoints Jesus' feet, she wipes his feet with her hair. To do that, she does something scandalous in Jewish society: she unbinds her hair and lets it down. Only harlots did this. A woman never "let her hair down" in public, as the saying still goes. According to Jewish law, a woman could be stoned for doing such an intimate and scandalous act.

And yet, down goes Mary's hair – she must have been nearly prostrate as she wiped Jesus' feet. Talk about unselfconscious! A public display of affection! She is consumed with her love and gratitude for the one who raised her brother from the dead. The people who were concerned with enforced ceremony blew their tops and harshly rebuked her. Yet, Jesus says, "leave her alone!" What she is doing will be remembered and reported forever. Hers is the kind of love that I desire.

Is your love for Jesus like that? Not conditioned by cost, by right, by what others think? I would sure like my love for God and for others to be like that. What could possibly motivate a love like that? A love for Christ where you give it all away, where you don't even think about what is owed you, and you couldn't care less what other people think. There is no obligation there: only desire. Again, what could possibly motivate a love like that?

Think about Mary for a second. Where is Mary whenever we see her? She's at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching. She's soaking up all he has to say, everything about him. She just witnessed Jesus raising her brother from death and had an intense conversation with Jesus about death and resurrection. Mary is deeply aware of what Jesus has done AND what he must soon do. Remember that this party is on the Saturday before Holy Week. She knows that Good Friday is coming. Verse 7 is the key: Jesus talks about his burial – Mary is anointing her Lord's body for the grave.

Do you hear this? At this festive dinner party, Mary is preparing Jesus for the cross. She knew that He must die, and my guess is that she knew that He must die for her. Although she wouldn't name it, she understood what we call the substitutionary atonement – Christ died for you. It must have melted her heart.

But Mary saw it: and it caused her to love with abandon. When you see it, it will cause you to love with abandon too. Desire comes from a melted heart: you can't lecture people into it, you can't legislate it, no enforced ceremony can make it happen. Only the cross of Christ can melt your heart – when you know that Jesus Christ went to the cross for you personally. This is why we always say at Communion “the body of Christ given for you, the blood of Christ shed for you.”

There is one more thing to say. The perfume was so sweet and potent that the smell would have stayed on Jesus' body all week, all through his beatings, his mocking, his scourging, his stripping, and his nailing on the cross. So her act makes His death a sweet death. Perhaps it brought him some comfort, this sensory recall of her love and devotion. This love is what he desired from Mary. This love is what he desires from you – a love that knows no cost, that considers no rights, that overflows the stern banks of ceremony despite the rebuke of others. A love that is generated by Him and for Him, a love whose heartbeat is the cross of Christ.

Amen.