

The woman anointing Jesus

Dear sisters and brothers,

when I got up this morning, my body told me that this would be a special exciting day. My heart was racing and my stomach felt heavy and was turning. Life is full of little situations like that where I feel uneasy or anxious about something. Three years ago I would have drunk a pot of coffee and felt dizzy on top of all that. But thankfully I was given „this“ (show the pot of ointment) which helps me to start out a day like today more confidently. You probably are asking yourself what it is. From the outside it doesn't look that special but as always the treasure is hidden inside. This little pot used to contain an ointment which Kids Club kids made at the childrens' retreat three years ago. I watched them while they were stirring, cooking, boiling and sniffing the odd ingredient, waiting and observing the mass that finally turned into a lotion the fragrance of which filled the air of the farmhouse in Kundl. For those kids this lotion was the most precious one ever made because they had put all their heart and energy into making it. But why would it help me to calm down on a day like today?

The reason for that is that it belongs to a story that I fell in love with when we played it at that very retreat. It's a story about a woman loving beyond boundaries. A story about courage, strength and faith. This little pot has since become a symbol for all of this. Of course I have had to replace the content in the course of the years but whenever I feel uneasy, I take it out, rub some of the lotion on my skin and enjoy the smell. Doing that I remember the day when it was given to me. A day full of love, joy, community and sharing. And I remember the story that it stands for. The story of the woman anointing Jesus.

I have acted out that story numerous times since then and I have had the opportunity to slip into different roles, view it from different perspectives and feel with one character or the other. Today I would like to slip into the role of Simon who was the host to Jesus and his disciples on the day of the dinner. I can picture how puzzled he must have been about the woman's act and Jesus' reaction and if I had been him, I would have told my friends about it, trying to grasp what had happened, right away. Let me share his version of the story with you.

Hi. My name is Simon. You won't believe the story I have to tell you. Yesterday I invited Jesus and his disciples to dine at my house. I had spent all day at the market to buy fresh fruit and my house still carried the smell of freshly baked bread when I laid the table with the finest cups and plates I had. I was honored to have Jesus as my guest and I did everything to welcome him.

Of course we were only men, sitting around the table, just the way it is common. It was a peaceful evening until something unexpected happened. All of the sudden a woman stood in the doorway. None of us had ever seen her before and I had surely not invited her to join us. After all she was a woman and not even a friend. I was going to get up and ask her to leave my house when she approached Jesus.

Obviously she didn't have a clue about the standards of our time nor did she respect Jesus and his friends. She kneeled down next to Jesus, took an alabaster jar from her cloak, broke it into pieces and poured the liquid over Jesus' head. The sound of breaking echoed in my ears while the fragrance of the ointment spread. From the jar and the label I could see how expensive and precious the ointment must have been. It must have cost at least 300 dinar. Just imagine how many hungry children you could have fed from the cost of the oil. And there she was wasting it. I was furious. I was determined to get up and make her leave when I looked into her face. Tears were running down her cheeks and she looked frightened and calm at the same time. Then I turned my head to Jesus. He was smiling at her. They just sat there for a minute, looking at each other and obviously sharing a moment that we others weren't part of. All of us were now staring at her and waiting for Jesus to reject her and show her her limits. But Jesus accepted her act of intimacy with profound respect and reverent silence. The silence was finally broken by the angry voices of Jesus' disciples. What a relief that they felt the same way I did. One of them was shouting: „A whole family could have lived a year on the money you've spent on that oil.“ And another one yelled: „What a waste!“ A third one was crying: „ Just think how many loaves of bread could have been made for that!“

It also made me angry that she would enter my house and become the center of attraction where everyone knew that she didn't even know Jesus. I hesitated to look at Jesus. Something about his posture, the look on his face and the way he let the woman come so close to him, frightened me.

And then his words made an end to our shouting. He stood there, calm as could be and answered: „Leave her alone Why are you troubling her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.“

I couldn't believe he was defending her. We were his true followers and she was only a strange woman who didn't know how to behave in the presence of Jesus. And hadn't he set an example to always give to the poor? Why was he accusing us of sticking to the rules he had taught us? What did she have about her that made him lose all his ideals? Then he continued: „The poor will always be with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She anointed me to prepare me for my burial.“

„But you will not always have me“

Hearing those words made me shiver and I felt scared. What did he mean? Did he know he would be dying soon? We all realized that the high priests didn't like the attention he was arousing and they were longing to see him dead. Although I was still angry, a feeling spread, down deep inside, that Jesus might have been fearful and anxious of the future lying ahead. What if none of us understood how he felt and had no feeling for the love and comfort he needed? Could it be possible that this strange woman had given him the warmth and comfort in her touch that he had longed for? Had her act brought healing to his heavy heart?

My mind was racing. I was trying to understand what she was able to give him and my heart was weary as I felt we had denied him something all along. I felt paralyzed at the thought that we might not be able to share much more time with him, nor save him, if it came to the worst.

„She did what she could.“

That sentence echoed in my ears. What did she do for him? What could we do for him?

I realized that she had given him something that lies beyond the act of touching, anointing, giving and daring. She had given all she had to give. Only the best was good enough for Jesus. No cheap perfume would have done the job of anointing her king. She used the most expensive perfume, made of pure nard in order to show how much she loved him. She had crossed each and every boundary to find him and minister to him, to care for him and not only balm his body but also his soul.

She had shown great courage to enter a circle of men, where women aren't appreciated and not even our angry looks could prevent her from fulfilling her act of love and grace. She didn't even fear to be rejected by Jesus. Just imagine the shame if he had pushed her away in front of all his friends. Everybody would have spoken about it.

And now everybody will tell the story of a woman who truly loved Jesus. After their disapproval has settled they will tell the story of a woman who understood Jesus and comforted him.

Jesus said himself: „ I am telling you. Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.“

My anger has vanished. I feel uneasy about the fact that it had to be a strange woman to minister to Jesus and we all failed to see what was on his heart and what danger he is in. But I can't help but admire that woman. Admire her courage and her understanding for the needs of Jesus. And this time she has set an example. We might not be able to save Jesus. We might not be able to heal him. But we can love him and show our love in everything we do.

This is what I will remember from a day so full of events, full of emotions and misunderstanding. I have understood. And what about you?

Let us take a minute to pause and think about Simon and his thoughts before we move on.

We know what happened right after that dinner. We know that his worst fears of losing Jesus came true very soon. Only a few hours after this event Judas betrayed Jesus. And we know that Jesus was right: The woman did anoint him for his burial.

I don't know how you feel about it, but every time I read the story I ask myself whether she knew that, too? Could she really see what the others weren't able to? Did she know how crucial her act of love would be?

The longer I think about it, the more I believe that it's not important whether she knew anything or not. She followed the feeling that she had deep inside. That made the difference. A feeling from the bottom of her heart telling her that it was the right thing to ignore the boundaries and anoint Jesus. A feeling that might have suggested that he needed her love and healing.

I am full of admiration for that woman. I wish my feeling was always that strong to be able to push away all the doubts and hesitations, the fear of what others might think and the limits they set.

Many events have taken place in my life since I fell in love with that story three years ago. Sometimes I think I knew that I would need the inspiration coming from that woman many times throughout the years.

There have been days when I woke up fearful, dreading difficult tasks. The thought of her gave me the courage not to focus always on the negative consequences of an action but rather on the positive outcome for me and others.

On other days I felt lost and struggled to survive in an environment dominated by authorities, restrictions, laws and bureaucracy. In those times of powerlessness the thought of her strength made me courageous enough to fight for myself and others and not let any rule or restriction hold me back.

On some days I sensed a feeling of helplessness while worrying about loved ones who were sick or stuck in a blind alley, with no way out. Realizing that there is nothing you can do to save or heal another person is a very painful experience. The story of the woman anointing Jesus taught me that there is always something you can do in situations that seem hopeless: You can always love and you can always care. You can show your love by touching others, holding them, sharing their sorrows and bringing them healing by just being there. And you can show that you care by praying and listening.

I once talked to a friend who works with children in Brazil about feeling powerless and finding comfort in this Bible story. He just smiled and shared an experience with me....

It took place only a few days after he had arrived in Brazil. He spoke hardly any portuguese at that time but he was called to the death- bed of a five- year- old girl. The moment he entered her room it was clear to him that there was nothing he could do to save her life. No medicine, no treatment, not the most expensive ointment could have saved her. There were no words he could have said to the family, even if his portuguese had been better. And who of us could find words of comfort in a foreign language where hope and happiness seem to have vanished forever?

In this very moment he remembered the story of the woman anointing Jesus. He didn't have any oil as expensive and precious as the ointment she had used. All they had was a simple oil, used to make salad dressing. There was no soothing fragrance in the air as he poured it on his hand and started to touch the feverish forehead of the little girl. But he noticed that his actions took away some of his fear and his helplessness. There was an atmosphere of love and peace that spread through the room at the moment she died. Her family was sitting at her bedside, holding her hand, crying and praying while they watched his hands calm her down. She died, of course. But she was surrounded by her family showing her love, sharing her pain and her anxieties, acknowledging what was happening rather than not being able to look and to bear it.

That scene reminded me a lot of the dinner at Simon's house. And it showed me once more that we can slip into any of the roles at any time. None of us can show our love for Jesus by anointing him but we can show it by doing for others what that woman did for him. I pray that we might be emboldened by her love and remember her story in times when it is up to us to make the difference and where others are longing for our touch and healing.

Sometimes it is maybe Jesus' role that we need to slip into. I wish for us that we might remember Jesus' receptivity to her and how he allowed her to care for him and love him. Let him be our example in times when we are troubled and are hesitant to share our pain with others. Let us show our strength through our weakness for a change.

And at last there might be a situation where we have to take on the role of Jesus' disciples and Simon the leper. Whenever in life we feel that somebody is crossing boundaries and behaving in a way we don't understand let us be touched by Jesus' words just as they were. And let us take time to look behind the curtain and understand somebody else rather than judging him.

Whoever we are and whatever we do. Let us love and let our love feel the unspoken needs for each other. Amen.