

Homily for Ordination / June 13, 2010

Dear Mary Kay, Dear Monique, Brothers and Sisters,

Jesus said: The truth is, wherever the Good News is proclaimed throughout the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her. And so we remember her on this solemn, grace-filled day of your ordination. What great deed did this nameless woman in the Gospel of Mark execute to inspire Jesus' promise of being remembered where- and whenever the Good News would be proclaimed. As we just heard, she entered a room in the house of Simon, the leper where Jesus was reclining at table. We can assume that besides his host, his disciples and other male friends of Jesus and Simon were present. She carried an alabaster jar of perfume made from a very expensive plant. After she broke the jar, she poured the perfume on Jesus head. Does this sound like a deed worthy to be remembered for all times and throughout all the world?

Let's look at this nameless woman and her story and the reaction of the male companions of Jesus to this event, a little bit closer.

The story of a woman approaching Jesus at a meal and anointing or caressing his head or feet is mentioned in all four gospels. Scripture scholars believe that the version we just heard may factually be the closest to the actual event. Only in the Gospel of John does the woman have a name, Mary of Bethany. Luke calls her a sinner, which a later pope used to defame the name of the Apostle Mary Magdalene.

What surprised me more than anything else when I prepared for this homily was the insight that this is the only time in all gospels that Jesus was anointed. And the only time he is anointed, he is anointed by a woman. Jesus equates the anointing with his burial. Women did play a role in the rituals that accompany burial. However, anointing the head of a person was also a sign of commissioning him for a special task or role, often a royal one. In those cases the one anointing was either a priest or a prophet, but always a male. We know from all four gospels that there were sharp reactions against the woman's act, either because of the money involved or the sinful status of the woman.

Was there maybe another reason that was not openly expressed: Was this woman daring to perform an act that was the exclusive privilege of males? Was she acting like a prophet or priest? Did she understand better than many of Jesus' followers that he had to suffer because he stood up to the Roman Empire and the Jewish priests who collaborated with the Romans? Did she know that his desire to form a radical and all inclusive table community of equals would lead him to his death? Was her lavish and extravagant gift of perfume an acknowledgement that she was anointing the Messiah for his burial, a Messiah who was radically different from the one that they all expected? She gave him an offering of total devotion not only to his person but also to his mission. Did she also claim in this act her own priestly and prophetic power as a woman, a power that enabled her to follow him and respond to his call?

We do not know. But we know that Jesus must have taken her act very seriously and accepted it with gratitude, understanding and the promise that generations to come would remember her. This is the reason why this gospel is so appropriate for the ordination of a woman deacon and a woman priest for service in our Catholic Church.

Are there women around us, now, in our times who act like the woman with the alabaster jar? I strongly believe so and I am sure quite a few come to your mind if you ponder the question. Do we see hierarchy and so called officials react in similar ways as the disciples did? The answer to this question is also a resounding yes. Let me give you a few examples which come to my mind.

1) 2002 seven women from Germany, Austria and the USA responded to the call to the priesthood and were validly ordained by a Catholic brother bishop. The Vatican excommunicated all seven.

2) 2009 Sister Louise Akers showed her support for Women' s ordination in many different ways, especially in her teaching. When she was asked by her Bishop to renounce her beliefs, she declined and was stripped of all her teaching authorities.

3) Just recently a group of courageous nuns contradicted their brother-bishops and helped through their support to pass a bill that will give many in this country better healthcare. The bishops

reacted very sharply.

4) A few weeks ago Sister Margaret McBride consented to the abortion of an 11 week fetus to save the mother's life. she lost her administrative job in a Catholic hospital in Phoenix and was excommunicated.

5) On May 16th, the same day we celebrated the mass of resurrection for our sister Mary Styne, our sister Janine Denomme died. Janine wanted to have her mass of resurrection in her beloved parish church. Her wishes were denied.

Today, you, Mary Kay and Monique are ready to take a step that will bring you similar reactions from many, especially from the hierarchy. Do not ponder too long about these reactions. Rather contemplate the story of the woman with the Alabaster jar. Above all, contemplate Jesus' answer and response. Can you imagine him saying to the pope who excommunicated the Danube seven: leave them alone. They are lovingly and courageously following my call. Can you imagine him saying to the bishop who condemned Sister Louise: Leave her alone. She understands my mission to bring a discipleship of equals and acts accordingly. And his reaction to Sister McBride and the other nuns would be: You are choosing life and compassion over rigid rules and regulations. And those of us who knew Mary and Janine can create your own stories how he greeted them when they arrived in Paradise.

So I ask you today to model your priesthood after the unnamed woman: love generously, focus on him, who is our path to God, our creator, and focus on his mission to build the kingdom of God, a discipleship of equals, an inclusive table community.