

March 21, 2010
Fifth Sunday in Lent
John 12:1-8
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

MAKING SENSE OF IT

I'd say the answer is five. If you asked me how many senses we have, I'd use the list attributed to Aristotle: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. But ask a neurologist the question and you will come up with different answers. The answers would range from nine to twenty-one depending on you who ask, and how they define a sense. Foregoing the big scientific words that I don't know and can't pronounce, these are "senses" most often added to the classic five: an awareness of balance, pressure, temperature, pain, and motion. Sometimes hunger and thirst are also added.

But you got to love the big five—seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, and hearing. Our lives are defined by these amazing entrees into our bodily, human experience. Some people are born without one of the senses or lose sight or hearing, for example, in old age. Maybe you've wondered what would be the hardest sense to live without?

Let's try to make sense of today's gospel through the five senses. Mary, Martha and Lazarus throw a dinner party for Jesus, a *taste* of community and celebration. These are the central characters in the story right before this one. Jesus weeps over the death of Lazarus and then raises him from the dead. Mary assumes the position of a disciple and kneels at Jesus' feet, trusting that love is stronger than death. The whole story creates quite a scene! Jesus is a threat and the powers that be want him put to death. In other words, he is a dead man walking. It's just a matter of time.

Back to the main scene at the dinner. And what do we *see*? Mary again kneels at Jesus' feet. And on his feet she pours an extravagant amount of expensive perfume. The *smell*—the fragrance—fills the whole house. What a contrast to the stench of death at the tomb of Lazarus. And then what we see makes us a little uncomfortable. We want to look away but we keep looking. Mary is *touching*—caressing—Jesus' feet with the perfume. Is it an act of love, an act of service, an act of devotion? In a matter of days Jesus will kneel down to wash the feet of his disciples, a sensory sign inviting them to turn love into acts of compassion and service.

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It is precisely through our senses that we will experience the great story of our faith in the next two weeks. It is only through our bodies that we will know salvation. It is through the senses, through all that it means to be human, that we will experience the mystery of dying and rising with Christ.

At the great Vigil of Easter, we will experience the resurrection of Christ with all five senses. With extravagant abundance, all of creation will proclaim that life is stronger than death: with fire, water, oil, music, stories, silence, flowers, processions, incense, bread and wine. With our bodies we will celebrate the risen body of Christ in our midst. We will baptize by pouring water on the body of Felisa, anoint her with oil, and clothe her in a white robe.

Next Sunday we will use our feet to walk a procession, carrying palms and singing hosanna. Then on Maundy Thursday we will get on our knees to wash feet, trusting that this bodily act may teach us more about God than any book or sermon. On Good Friday we will use our bodies to offer reverence to the cross, trusting that through a suffering, broken body we are healed and given new life.

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You can sense the reverence as Mary anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume. But the holy moment is interrupted by Judas. His words break the silence. They startle the *ears*, to mention that sense of things. "What a waste. Why wasn't this lavish perfume sold and the money given to the poor?"

But the Jesus in John's gospel is prescient, knows the future. Judas will betray Jesus. Jesus' body will be buried in a garden with excessive spices that cover the odor of death. Jesus knows that Judas could care less about the poor. In fact he is a thief! "Leave her alone," he says. "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

A hard phrase to make sense of. Jesus' whole ministry has been to the poor, the needy, and those on the margins. He is certainly not telling us to forgo justice and mercy. Rather it is an in-your-face comment to Judas, calling him on his hypocrisy: come to your senses!

Yet Mary senses the crisis of this poignant moment of life and death.

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Kay called it a "last bath" for her mother, Thelma. It's a moving story in the book, *Honoring the Body*, that we are reading together this Lent. As a child Kay remembered sharing wonderful conversation during her mother's nighttime baths. She would watch her mom scrub her face until it shone pink and then smooth on face cream.

Now her mother is dying of cancer and Kay offered to give her a bath. After Thelma undresses, Kay gently lowers the precious body that she has looked at, loved and memorized her whole life. Thelma lets out sighs of pleasure as water is poured over her, matched only by her daughter's sobs, as tears fell into the water of her mothers' last bath.

"The eyes of love with which Kay gazes at her dying mother perceive the sacredness of every inch of her mother's suffering body. This does not mean that her heart is not breaking. This does not mean that it is not unbearable to hold her mother as she vomits, to watch helplessly as she struggles to swallow even one sip of water. This does not mean that Kay does not hate that her mother is dying.

It means that when she pours water over her throat and neck, (Kay) can hear the echo of the waters of her mother's baptism, which promises that her dignity will not be compromised by bedsores or vomit. It means that no matter how wasted her mother's body becomes, she recognizes there what the woman who washed Jesus' feet with tears and ointment saw: a suffering temple of the Holy Spirit, cherished by God." (Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body*, pp. 35-39.)

Maybe it is only through our bodies that we can make sense of it: the mystery of life and death.