

I want to talk a bit about John's Gospel. In our three year cycle of readings, there is a year devoted to each of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John is added to each of the other three. I think we tend to give different weight to each version of the Gospel, depending upon our beliefs – our personal theology, which is natural. But we also tend to conflate all four, which gives us a more full understanding of the Christ event – both historically and theologically. All of the Gospel writers contribute to the picture we have of Jesus and his life and work among us – and his saving act of love on the cross – that informs us about the nature of God. The good news is the good news. And we really have only one Gospel, within which we have the Gospel according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, and according to John.

That said, I have always tried to stay with one writer at a time, because all four versions have such distinctive perspectives. But when John pops into the Sunday readings, I have to remind myself that on that Sunday we have a very unique point of view. John is a post-Easter interpretation of the life and work of Jesus the Christ. The Synoptics told that history through the lens of the author's understanding of God's work in Jesus interpreted for a particular audience. Indeed all three individual versions were written, translated, interpreted within a distinct communities of faith in mind. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell of the historical Jesus with their own interpretations. The stories were preserved through oral transition, adapted, expanded, and reinterpreted again and again for the early church's needs at later times. Likewise, the author of John reinterpreted for the early church to respond to their needs.

The ancient Christian church thought that the Synoptics simply told the history and John was written as a supplement and theological interpretation of the other three

Gospels. They believed that the writer knew the other Gospels. But more recent scholars acknowledge that all four Gospels are combinations of historical facts and theological interpretation. John and the Synoptics do differ. The synoptics differ somewhat themselves. But now it is believed that where John differs from Mark, Matthew, and Luke we actually have a more historical account of that event. John then should be treated independently from the Synoptic Gospels. John does not incorporate material from the others, although he knew of their existence and was sometimes influenced by them. Rather the author of John had his own traditions and sources and used them and interpreted them in his own way. So John is an interpretation of the events as they were remembered and repeated after Easter by eyewitnesses. The developing community had a great influence on the original stories and the original stories and sayings were adapted to the needs of the developing community of the church. Preaching and teaching reshaped John's version. The community then really reshaped the stories and sayings of Jesus in his name. They believed that the Spirit of Christ was totally present in their community, and they were authorized to speak for Jesus. That is exactly what we still do today when the Word is taught and preached, is it not? So now it is thought that the first edition of these stories and sayings of Jesus in John was the reformulated traditions of the community presented in a very dramatic new way. A second later edition was composed and an epilogue was added as well as other additions and changes. This final edition took into account new insights of the community in interpreting John's Gospel in the context of the larger church.¹

This then is this edition we now have, the version of Gospel according to John that was accepted or canonized into the Bible. The canon of the Bible was frozen or fixed in the 4th century.² I believe it was a thoroughly divinely inspired process. As evidence of the divine inspiration I can only offer the fact that the Word as we have it today still is alive and still inspires Christians all over the world. God speaks through the Bible. You can especially feel it when it is read aloud. So let us turn to what we have just heard read.

Before we do let us remember that in John there are no poor, no wicked rich, no publicans (meaning tax collectors), no sinners, no widows, no children, no women fellow travelers (Indeed there was no distinction made between male and female disciples. Twelve male disciples is nearly invisible in the 4th Gospel. The disciples were all just people – like us.) They were no unclean demoniacs, no lepers, no shepherds, no prostitutes, and no mention of Jesus's compassion or pity. John's Christ exists on a much larger scale. John's focus is the Christ event, and it is taken as a whole to express God's saving grace for all the world rather than individual acts of grace done by our Lord for a particular individual or group. So we can see the danger of choosing one Gospel over another or over all the others. And we can see the danger of trying to harmonize them. So on to John's story told for us all – understanding that I too am reinterpreting this global – this cosmic – story for us today here in this place.

It was just a week before the Passover – our Lord's last Passover. Jesus and the disciples were gathered in the large home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Their home was so welcoming. They were in the room where they often had come for solace to rest and sometimes to get away from the demanding crowds that followed our Lord. They had just enjoyed another of Martha's delicious meals. And they were reclining around the table, as was the custom in 1st century. Mary hung on his every word got up and left the room. When she came back she had let down her hair. Now no respectable woman would appear in public without covering her hair, But this was Mary, one of the extended family of disciples of our Lord. And this was her home. She carried with her a container of ointment. It was costly nard that was used to prepare bodies for burial. It was a whole pound of this precious ointment. Mary bought it to prepare her Lord's body for burial. Jesus had told his closest companions that he was to die. Most of them did not want to believe him. But Mary, Mary believed his every word. She did what was most needed. Mary knew how to respond to Jesus without being told.

When Mary opened the container the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the

spikenard. Mary sat down adoringly at Jesus's feet as she had done so many times before. There could be no question in anyone's mind that this was right – that Mary belonged there. She poured the nard on his feet, rather than his head. And no one was surprised. No one reacted with shock or discomfort. This was Mary, one of Jesus's closest friends. Everyone knew how spontaneous she was. They had seen Mary express herself, and they all trusted her genuine love for Jesus – and his for her. It was a completely natural thing for Mary to do. She took the nard and bathed his feet, then she wiped them with her hair.

Only Judas spoke up and expressed his displeasure. He pointed out that this much nard – a Roman pound which was about 12 ounces – could have been sold for 300 denarii – the equivalent of a year's wages for a labourer. Mary had done a most extravagant thing by anointing Jesus, and Judas protested the loveliness of the anointing.³ But Jesus did not protest. He allowed this beautiful loving act – this anointing – for his burial – and washing his feet. Later at the Passover meal Jesus would wash all his disciples' feet as an expression of his love for them. Jesus would do this act of service for them and ask them to do for one another what Mary had done for him. John's Painting of Mary is a picture of what the life of a disciple truly looks like. Mary modeled for all the disciples – and for us – a life of love. Mary fulfilled Jesus's commandment to love before he even taught it. So John's Gospel named a woman as the first to embody the love that Jesus taught. This vision in John's Gospel then as a community that is shaped by love and grounded in relationship with Jesus was seen for the first time by a female disciple. Of course, by conventional standards a woman had no claim to Mary's position – none at all. But John's Gospel does not conform to some of the church's stereotypical assumptions about the composition of Jesus's circle of disciples. The disciples were and are to be like Mary – people that Jesus loved, people who loved him, people who lived out that love.

It is my prayer that we all might be disciples who live out Jesus's love in our world.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ I rely upon a number of commentaries including, among others, *The People's New Testament*, M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London (2004) and *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume IX, Abingdon Press, Nashville (1995).

² **c. 1400–400 B.C.** Books of the Hebrew Old Testament written
c. 250–200 B.C. The Septuagint, a popular Greek translation of the Old Testament, produced
A.D. 45–85? Books of the Greek New Testament written
90 and 118 Councils of Jamnia give final affirmation to the Old Testament canon (39 books)
140-150 Marcion's heretical "New Testament" incites orthodox Christians to establish a NT canon
303-306 Diocletian's persecution includes confiscating and destroying New Testament Scriptures
c. 305-310 Lucian of Antioch's Greek New Testament text; becomes a foundation for later Bibles
367 Athanasius's Festal Letter lists complete New Testament canon (27 books) for the first time
397 Council of Carthage establishes orthodox New Testament canon (27 books)
c. 400 Jerome translates the Bible into Latin; this "Vulgate" becomes standard of medieval church
ENGLISH VERSIONS FROM LATIN
c. 650 Caedmon, a monk, puts Bible books into verse
c. 735 >Historian Bede translates the Gospels
871-899 King Alfred the Great translates the Psalms and 10 Commandments
950 The 7th-century Lindisfarne Gospels receive English translation
955-1020 Aelfric translates various Bible books
c. 1300 Invention of eyeglasses aids copying
c. 1325 Both Richard Rolle and William Shoreham translate psalms into metrical verse
1380-1382 John Wycliffe and associates make first translation of the whole Bible into English
1388 John Purvey revises Wycliffe Bible
1455 Gutenberg's Latin Bible—first from press
ENGLISH VERSIONS FROM GREEK
1516 Erasmus's Greek New Testament, forerunner to the Textus Receptus used by KJV translators
1525 William Tyndale makes the first translation of the New Testament from Greek into English
1536 Tyndale strangled and burned
1537 Miles Coverdale's Bible completes Tyndale's work on the Old Testament
1538 Great Bible, assembled by John Rogers, the first English Bible authorized for public use
1560 Geneva Bible—the work of William Whittingham, a Protestant English exile in Geneva
1568 Bishop's Bible—a revision of the Great Bible
1582 Rheims New Testament published
1607-1611 King James Version, the "Authorized Version," is made

³ There are dramatic differences in the four Gospels. In Matthew and Mark's Gospels the this anointing took place in the home of Simon the leper. In Luke's Gospel Jesus was in one of the house of a Pharisee. In the Gospel according to John, the anointing was in the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. We must resist worrying over what we 21st century people might call discrepancies in the Gospels. Rather we should seek the truth in the different versions.