

John 12:1-8  
April 7, 2019

## Christening

In the movie, “The Quiet Man,” there is a scene in which Maureen O’Hara is exiting a church after Sunday Mass, and as she approaches the bowl of holy water to anoint herself for another week of living, John Wayne rushes up and intervenes. He cups his hands full of water so that she can draw it from him instead of the bowl. She takes it from him even though it is inappropriate. Michaleen Oge Flynn called it, “paddy fingers in the holy water,” and told him not to do it.

The use of water and other substances for such rituals is actually not uncommon when one thinks about it. Before each major league baseball game, the umpires will take a bucket of brand new baseballs and rub them with a special kind of dirt to prepare them for the game.

Whenever someone plans to be outdoors for several hours at a time, especially in the summer when the temperature is high and the sun is shining, it is customary to pack sun-block apply it to the exposed parts of the body to protect the skin from the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun.

Before eating, most of the time, and in order to affect sanitary conditions for the consumption of food, it is also customary to wash one’s hands with soap, which removes unhealthy bacteria and germs that may have

collected on the hands throughout the course of the day.

When one has a minor cut, Neosporin, or Polysporin is used; when one has a minor burn, the extract from the Aloe plant provides soothing relief from pain; one could go on, all kinds of lotions are used on the face and hands and body to provide moisture for the skin to prevent drying out.

And there is water itself. On the outside it cools and cleanses, and when consumed in the right way on the inside it is necessary to sustain life. Without having to be religious at all, people involve themselves in the ancient practice of anointing with various substances for various reasons. Historians can not say when these practices began, they pre-date written history. It is “mashah,” in Hebrew, “Christen,” in Greek.

## Religion

It was only a matter of time before the act to applying substances on the skin came to have religious significance and to be used in rituals like the holy water and baptismal and healing services to symbolize inner cleansing and protection and preparation for life and consecration for many of the tasks that must be performed. People are anointed at birth, and again at death, and at various times throughout life, when there is sickness to be healed or some mission to perform.

The practice also became a part of the political realm when national leaders ascended to power, so that the

term “anointed,” came to be applied to religious and spiritual leaders alike. In time, after the rising and falling of many leaders and administrations, there arose the belief that one day there would be a particular leader that would heal the land and the peoples who live on it, and bring justice and liberation and at long last peace and prosperity.

In the Hebrew that person came to be known as the “Messiah,” not just *an* anointed one, but *the* anointed. The Greek translation is “Christ,” and it was applied by the believers to Jesus himself. It is the source of our name - Christian.

John

Shortly after the raising of Lazarus, and not long before the fateful Passover at which the Passion of Christ would occur, Jesus was again in Bethany visiting Lazarus along with his sisters Mary and Martha. Mary came to Jesus with some very expensive perfume and poured it on his feet, and then wiped his feet with her hair, filling the room with its fragrance.

From Luke’s gospel we learn that this is the same Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet as he taught and neglected that her sister Martha was overwhelmed with the tasks of meal preparation for all her guests. Jesus affirmed Mary for her attention paid to his teaching, and to the spiritual aspects of life.

Once again, we see Mary, with a spiritual connectedness to the reality of the hour, performing a provocative act the aroused complaints from some of those present. In this case it was Judas Iscariot, of all people, who complained that the expense of the perfume was extravagant and could have been saved and the money spent to help the poor.

Also, once again, Jesus affirmed Mary in her extravagance. Unlike the others, Mary seemed to understand that Jesus was headed to Jerusalem where he would be killed. Even though he had tried to prepare his followers at great length, they had failed to hear.

“Leave her alone,” Jesus said, “it was intended that she should have this perfume for the day of my burial . . .”

This act, according to some interpreters, was his Christening.

Sacrifice

It is remarkable that he allowed her to do it. Even in that ancient place and time it bordered on the inappropriate. It stood for the set of events that were happening to them all, right before their eyes, even though they failed to understand. Life is very much like that, we wait around for something to happen not noticing that what we are awaiting *is* happening, slowly, gradually, “the crazy passing of what we thought would never pass.” (Buechner)

In the case of Jesus, he was making a sacrifice in the lower case historical sense. He and his followers were headed into a storm that would threaten to consume them all. In that storm Jesus allowed himself to be arrested and executed so that the rest of them would not be harmed.

Quite apart from the theology of Redemption that became the principle understanding of the meaning of his death, in the immediate circumstance, Jesus sacrificed his life to save theirs. It was his special task. This amazingly intimate moment, Mary anointed him. She used very expensive perfume, and she wiped his feet with her hair.

For Us

But we are not in that immediate circumstance. For us, the death has a far greater meaning because it was an Atonement, it was a reconciliation between God and the human race. It has a greater significance than the followers of Jesus knew at the time.

In the grand theological interpretation it stood for the Redemption of the world from sin and guilt. It means for us our own salvation. It means the victory of good over evil, life over death, mercy over judgment, meaning over emptiness and despair.

It is really not surprising that someone made a fuss over it while it was happening, and by this lesser known Mary from a story that has several Marys in it, Jesus was Christened, and with a pleasing aroma

because sacrifices like the one he was about to make are pleasing to God.

One is surely meant to have a reverence for tradition that would prevent an extravagance like the one John Wayne performed in the movie, just like Mary might have been expected to have a sense of value in a poor society in which every penny counted. But life *is* an extravagance, and one might say we are meant to live it extravagantly, not superficially, or even casually. Every breath you take is a gift from God. Every bite of food you eat, every sip from a cup of coffee is an extravagant giving of life.

A little paddy fingers in the holy water every now and again is both appropriate and necessary, especially when we are able to find a way to christen each other by giving life to each other's life.

Sadly, people have been touching each other in abusive and inappropriate ways for so long that we are going through a time of correction that requires us to hold back on actually touching each other, but there are other ways to bless.

Acknowledging the significance of each moment; each small sacrifice, each gesture of kindness, each act of compassion or empathy, each good deed given to others or received from them is a Christening that cleanses, protects, and enlivens. Give and receive them, and most of all, in faith, accept the Christening Christ has given you.

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