Preaching Notes for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C (March 13, 2016)

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[**John 12:1-8**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=122#gospel_reading)

In the midst of celebrating of Women's History month in the United Methodist Church, it is a particularly interesting time to be writing on this topic, given the political climate and the fact that one of the top candidates running for President of the United States in the Democratic primaries is a woman. I am writing these words on the day before the Iowa Caucus, so I don’t know where Hillary Clinton’s chances will stand by the time you read these words in mid-March. It is simply too early to tell.

One of the things that keeps coming up in conversations about the Democratic primary is the issue of gender. Inevitably, if a woman is strongly supportive of Hillary Clinton, those who support Bernie Sanders will assume the support is primarily because Clinton is a woman. Most of the women I know who support Hillary Clinton for president do consider her gender to be an important thing, but not to the extent that they would vote for a woman over any other candidate only on the basis of gender. For example, there are female candidates, past and present, who would not get my vote because they are running on political platforms with which I strongly disagree.

But the fact is, electing a female as President of the United States is important to me, as a woman and as a feminist. I recently read the statistics on [salary discrepancies](http://tobingrant.religionnews.com/2016/01/12/gender-pay-gap-among-clergy-worse-than-national-average-a-first-look-at-the-new-national-data/) between male and female clergy. I have to say that I was not surprised, but I was deeply saddened. Shortly after I read about salary inequality, a list of the [top twenty-five fastest growing large United Methodist Churches](http://lenwilson.us/top-25-fastest-growing-large-umc-2015/) was published; and I noted that not a single one of those congregations had a female as the lead pastor. Once again I was not surprised, but I was deeply saddened.

These are first-world problems, and they make me sad. But the much more tragic story of the terrible toll gender inequality takes on women comes not from the first world, but from developing countries. I remember a few years ago being brought to tears by the stories about the plight of women around the world that I learned about by watching the documentary [*Half the Sky*](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/half-the-sky/)*.*

So I’m sure you are wondering if I’m going to get to the Scripture, or I’m going to use up all of my space (and your time) talking about women’s rights. But in fact, I was reminded of the continued undervaluation of women not by today’s headlines, but by this story from the twelfth chapter of John’s Gospel. In reading this story again, I was inspired to go back to one of my most treasured resources, Bonnie Thurston’s [*Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*](http://www.amazon.com/Women-New-Testament-Questions-Commentary/dp/1592445586/)(Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1998) to re-read both Thurston’s introduction to John’s treatment of women and her specific insights into this story.

Thurston notes that in John’s version of this scene of a woman anointing Jesus’ feet, the woman is identified. It is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, all three of whom were close friends of Jesus. Thurston believes, in fact, as do other scholars, that Martha and Mary were more than friends of Jesus. They were, along with the twelve men, among the closest followers of Jesus. By the time that John’s Gospel was written, probably sometime in the 90s, the developing Christian communities had offices, including apostles and deacons. Deacons were ordained by the apostles with the laying on of hands, and their job was to serve at table. Thurston suggests that perhaps Martha was, in the gospel writer John’s community, an ordained deacon.

Mary’s actions in this scene may indicate that she was, in fact, a disciple. The fact that she let down her hair in public suggests some sort of close, personal relationship with these men. Jesus allows her to touch him as she bends down to anoint his feet, possibly giving rise to his decision in the next chapter (see John 13:1-9) to illustrate for his male disciples the core meaning of discipleship. The double meaning that Mary brings, that she is, in Jesus’ own words, anointing him “for the day of my burial” makes it clear that the end is coming for Jesus. But then she wipes the perfume off with her hair, suggesting by her actions that the oils needed for burial were not necessary for Jesus because his body would not stay in the tomb. Thurston writes that when Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with nard and wipes it off with her hair, she not only predicts his death and Resurrection, but she becomes “a disciple in a technical sense as she fulfills the Lord’s command in 13:14-15” (Thurston, 89) to demonstrate their discipleship by serving others.

Mary assumes her right to approach Jesus and express her love, and when a male (Judas) objects, Jesus not only confirms her freedom to do so but rebukes the man who would restrict her. In John, Mary and Martha are crucial characters. Martha is depicted as the representative of faith and full Christological confession. Mary by her initiative represents the active practice of discipleship (Thurston, 89).

Women’s lives mattered to our Lord Jesus Christ. They mattered so much that he was willing to put himself at societal risk time and time again to uphold the value of women’s lives. He healed the hemorrhaging woman with his touch. He gave living water to the Samaritan woman at the well. He included women in his close circle of traveling companions. Women were the first to witness his Resurrection. Women held positions of leadership alongside men in the earliest witnesses we have of Christian community.

It was not Jesus, but rather, the patriarchal culture of the Roman Empire, that quickly began reigning in on the roles women could hold in the church, so that by the time of the pastoral letters, rules about appropriate behavior and limitations on women’s roles began to appear, both in our canon and outside of it (in early church orders documents).

And of course, the rest is history, as they say. For generations, most cultures of the world have considered women to be unequal to men. And many religious traditions, including Christianity, have chosen to interpret their holy writings to support the status quo rather than challenge it.

I believe that there were more than twelve apostles. I believe that some of the original apostles of Jesus Christ were women. I believe there is strong evidence to support this notion. And I believe that the church has not only discounted this evidence, but has kept it hidden for generations in order to keep women in their place in the culture.

The time has come to change this. We have come a long way, but there is still a long way yet to go before women are treated with equal respect to men. The story of Mary’s extraordinary actions in the twelfth chapter of John’s Gospel may, in fact, be one of the key ways we can begin to rewrite the narrative of women’s history in the Christian faith, and I hope you will join with me in helping to share the old, old story in a new way this Lent.

[**Isaiah 43:16-21**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=122#hebrew_reading)

I suggest using the Isaiah passage somewhere during your worship service, either as the basis for a pastoral prayer or split it up as a call to worship. The message that God is doing a new thing will fit nicely if you are using the preaching notes on John. Here are some questions to wrestle with:

* How do you see God doing a new thing in your context?
* Are you in the wilderness, thirsting for life-giving water?
* In the midst of struggle, do you and your people continually praise God?

[**Philippians 3:4b-14 (Common English Bible)**](http://www.commonenglishbible.com/explore/passage-lookup/?query=Philippians+3%3A4b-14+)

In reading Paul’s letter this week, I found myself drawn to the idea of loving inclusiveness in the church. Paul writes about his own religious pedigree, and don’t we all feel the need to defend that sometimes? “I’m a lifelong Methodist!” “My grandfather laid the brick on this church!” “I went to seminary!” Paul felt this way. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a favorite of the twelve tribes. He observed the Law. He was a Pharisee, sometimes more concerned with the legalistic aspect of the Jews’ relationship with God.

This all changed when he met Christ, didn’t it? In this passage he writes about laying his pedigree aside for the value of knowing Christ Jesus. I would hope that we have all had golden moments of laying aside our pride and righteousness in order to be close to Christ.

“In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ” (3:9) . We, especially those set apart for ordained or licensed ministry, should take care not to put on a cloak of righteousness. We may be able to quote Scripture, or John Wesley, or the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, but just as God extended grace beyond the chosen people to the Gentiles, so God continues to extend grace to all people. Let us be sure we are willing servants in extending that grace and not to let righteousness get in the way. We should remind those sitting in our congregations that God extends grace to those persons visiting for the first time as well as to those whose families built the church years ago.

This passage doesn’t end just with the command to rid ourselves of mindless and rigid conformity to the Law in order to know Christ better. Instead, Paul gives us much hope in verses 12-14, and it fits perfectly with our Methodist doctrine of growing in Christian love and perfection. Paul says “It’s not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose” (12) . Paul’s talking about prevenient grace and sanctification right there, is he not? Christ reaches out to us before we know him, so that we may forever continue to grow in love. If you’re looking to introduce a little Methodist doctrine in your preaching, here’s your opening: “The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus” (14). Brothers and sisters, our goal is entire sanctification, love of God and love of neighbor. That’s God’s call and Jesus’ command, and Paul is writing about reaching out for that prize. Paul gives us a stepping stone, a direction toward that Christian Love: Leave off righteousness from the Law, but cling to the righteousness of Christ alone. Be inclusive to those without your pedigree, those who are different from you, those in your church that are new faces. Grow in perfection.