

Working Against the Shriveling of the Human Heart
 John 12:1-8 [Psalm 126] Isaiah 43:16-21
 March 21, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

John 12:1-8 *Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them¹ with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii¹ and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

Isaiah 43:16-21 *¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.*

Whenever we find ourselves depressed about the state of the world – a spiritual condition one might say is endemic in our time – it is helpful to review some history with clear and unprejudiced eyes. A colleague and I were chatting about our discouragement with politics recently, deploring the disarray in leadership, the incivility, the bluster and pretense. But then we recalled having each read David McCulloch's masterful biography of John Adams and the ice-water-in-the-face corrective dose of reality McCulloch provides with his truth-telling about our founding fathers. As grade school children we learned to think of Jefferson, Washington, Adams, Hamilton and the rest as paper figures superhuman in wisdom, heroic in liberty, paragons of faith, and exemplars of everything we fear our current leaders are not.

In actuality, our founding fathers were as often antagonists as they were friends, disagreeing sometimes violently over divergent principles, as dubious about the place of religion as they were about the role of kings, and who utterly failed in facing some of the most egregious social injustices (such as slavery) bowing, instead, to the power of economics over moral fortitude.

If the stories we tell about ourselves are constructed of partial, edited truth or – worse yet – the never-was, perspectives on our own time and of our selves will inevitably be distorted and naïve. No people progresses spiritually, socially, or politically by remembering a golden past that never existed. Especially in times of stress and anxiety, it is tempting to invent what we wish were true. The emotionally wounded personality regresses into a childhood of imaginary friends, little responsibility, and the blaming of

others for our unhappiness. Societies can regress, too, in the face of such times, living a selective past, constructing an imaginary destiny.

Walter Brueggemann teaches that what is unsaid among us – or what is said that is untrue – leads to violence; what is said turns into energy. Saying what is true about our ancestors and knowing that things haven't changed much over the past two hundred years may not be encouraging in itself, but that kind of honesty would release the energy of truth and hope, for we would know that our forebears struggled as we struggle and that the struggle is itself an act of faith. Saying what is true about ourselves is a freeing act of confession and the only weapon we have against self-deceit.

Saying the unsaid is the vital function of the prophets in scripture. The new world God is bringing into being in our midst will never arrive if our faith is vested in an old, imagined world that never existed. As in remembered civil history where we strip the humanity from our heroes, so in our approach to scripture we make plaster saints out of the Bible's heroes. As a grade school version of American history cripples our ability to put our selves and our times in perspective, a Sunday School version of the Bible is deficient in nourishing a robust faith in us.

It is true, the Bible tells grim and gritty tales not appropriate for children. In Sunday School I never learned the guerilla war nature of David's coup de tat removal of King Saul. At that age we couldn't grasp King David's lustful abuse of power in taking Bathsheba or the enormity of his conspiracy to kill her husband. We learned of Samson's strength and purity, but no one pointed out that his action in pulling down a building upon the heads of three thousand Philistines, in today's frame of reference, qualifies him as a terrorist. As children, we didn't hear much about slavery, polygamy, stolen inheritances, and murderous raids.

We forget – or never learned – that the early church was born in a separatist and condemned Jewish sect, that Jesus was executed for sedition, and that – at least in part – we have four gospels because those who wrote them thought the others had it wrong. Burnished in the sanitized popular imagination of the Bible are paper figures without blemish, without doubt or fear or anxiety, and with only a thin veneer of real humanity.

If it's true that those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it, what happens when the history you learn omits grief and sadness, murder and mayhem, illness and death? Wouldn't it be more helpful to encounter a modern perplexity and say as a people with a real spiritual heritage, "Our ancestors have been here before; let's learn from them, or at least not perpetuate their mistakes?"

We are rendered powerless when our understanding of the past is edited, dulled, varnished, and selective. Health begins to enter an individual, a family, a society when truth-telling is practiced. The power of faith is discovered when loss and tragedy are not glossed over and denied. The meaning of your life and mine is not found in airbrushing out the warts and wattles from our faces, but in telling the contradictory, untamed truth. "While sitting for the photographer Yousuf Karsh one day, George Bernard Shaw remarked that Karsh "might make a good picture of him - but none as good as the picture he had seen at a recent dinner party where he glimpsed, over the shoulder of his hostess, a perfect portrait of himself: 'Cruel, you understand, a diabolical caricature, but absolutely true.' He had pushed by the lady, approaching the living image, and found he was looking into a mirror!" [*Anecdote*, internet]

It seems ironic, but the pains of heart and mind and soul that we suffer are actually reduced when we face them honestly. It is the truth that makes us free, not illusion. Health can be wrested back from illness by a full understanding of the cause of disease, not by pretending it doesn't exist. As a father advised his daughter when she was fretting and fuming over some unfairness she had suffered, "My dear, if you would only realize how rough life is, things would go much more smoothly for you."

Were you to look in chapter eleven of the Gospel According to John – the chapter preceding this morning's text – you would encounter these lines: "(Caiaphas) prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation..." [John 11:51]; "The chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him." [John 11:57] "So from that day on they planned to put him to death." [John 11:53];

It is in this context of his impending death that Mary anoints Jesus feet. "Nothing more wonderfully concentrates a man's mind than the sure knowledge he is to be hanged in the morning," Samuel Johnson famously said, but some of Jesus' friends lounging there in Lazarus' house seem willfully oblivious to his looming execution. It is Jesus who provides the interpretation of Mary's act. The anointing is part of the ritual of preparing a body for death, a reality Mary is willing to face. The others are lost in denial and engage in a theoretical debate about alms-giving.

The strength of the Bible's stories is lost when their rough edges are smoothed, their inconsistencies glossed over, and their frank presentations of life are ignored. The expense of Mary's costly perfume reminds us that our hope does not come from our wealth or any of those resources we hoard and think so important but is found only when our trust and adoration are invested in that which is holy and true. Our energy comes from hope which is a gift enjoyed in knowing that God is present and working to wrest a new thing from the ashes of defeat. The tragedy of life is not death, but what we let die inside us while we live. God's new thing is not the same as an easy thing, however. New things include weeping over the death of Jesus and after confusion and considerable fear coming to grasp over time that somehow he is alive. New things mean starting over, and starting over again each day, as necessary.

Barbara Ehrenreich's newest book is *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. Martin Copenhaver, in a recent evaluation of the book, writes, "*Ehrenreich insists that the alternative to positive thinking is not despair; it is realism. Although she does not make this a theological argument, I think she would appreciate the distinction between positive thinking and the gospel. Positive thinking can be a lulling mixture of illusion and denial. By contrast, the gospel is based on hard realities, like sin and death, but can remain ultimately hopeful because it is also based on the reality of a God who triumphs over both.*"

The stories of Genesis and Exodus and the writings of the prophets remind us that some of life is going to be spent in wilderness and in exile. When we are in such desolate places it is important to acknowledge it and name it, not to suppose that it is the promised land in disguise. Will such experiences hurt and disrupt or save and comfort? As any mother can attest, new life comes into the world in pain, but that fact does not diminish the hope that is invested in what has come to life. The difference between being a mere optimist and a Christian one is that the former lives by the principle that life is good and

the latter by the principle that God is good. Faith, after all, is not the conviction that we are uniquely blessed but the conviction that we are eternally loved.

Walter Brueggemann has said that the work of the church is to inveigh against the shriveling of the human heart. If we remain in denial about life's realities long enough, our hearts will become numb. If we cling to imagined pasts long enough, we will never discover the truth of God's creation of newness in our midst. If we go forth eager to find God's purposes fulfilled in us, the new will ever be welcome, the consequences of our decision will ever be useful for God's kingdom, and joy will be ours without limit.

"If God ever spoke, God is still speaking," wrote Rufus Jones. "God is the Great I Am, not a Great I Was." God is doing a new thing. Release your hold on the artificially constructed past. Your life has never been lived before. This congregation has never existed before, and the challenges of the day have never presented themselves to this community of faith quite this way before. Life is not something we must escape from to be happy. Life is the good gift of God, into which God invites us, draws us, and leads us. The new has never been easy, but it is that essence of God by which God creates each day and makes us worthy of its gifts.