

Adoring as a Practice of Faith
 John 12:1-8
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During Lent we have been talking about practices of faith. Resisting evil, listening for God, repenting, forgiving, and today's verb is adoring. This is a verb in the extreme! On a continuum, it's on the far end, way over on the radical end. I've heard people say they adore their grandchildren. (Not so common to hear people say they adore their children!) For me, about the only thing I'd probably say I adore is chocolate!

Some years ago I might have said I adored downhill skiing. To say you adore something is putting it in the category of a high mountaintop experience! Way up there!

Jim Burklo was the campus minister at Stanford University. He is interested in how people seek mountaintop experiences but also how they "come home" in regular worship. He tells about an experience when he was invited to preach at a black church.

"It was a congregation of about 75 members, and when [Rev. Burklo] arrived it seemed that all of them were in attendance. This little church, crammed into its broken-down building, had four choirs—each of them excellent. [Burklo] discovered that [he] was one of three preachers for the day. The service took about three hours; there was no need for a printed church bulletin, considered essential in churches like [ours]. In the midst of the wonderful singing and the call-and-response between preacher and congregation, someone in the pews spontaneously called out: 'Mrs. Washington! Play your harmonica for us!' The rest of the congregation urged her on. With an "Aw, shucks," the old woman stood and pulled a harmonica out of her purse and started to play it. It sounded awful—sour notes, a broken tune. ...But the congregation amen-ed and hallelujah-ed with just as much gusto as they had done for their wonderful choirs, solo singers, and preachers. Burklo was moved to tears by this profound lesson: pure worship is any sincere, heartfelt, best effort to adore God" (*Open Christianity*, 146).

When we worship, we adore God. Each church has its own way of doing that. We can feel like we are "coming home" when our worship allows us to encounter God and adore God. In *our* service, it might be the prelude that allows us to center ourselves and focus our attention on God. It might be the prayer time that lets us sink deeper into an intimate relationship with God. It might be the words spoken—both those that bring comfort and those that inspire or challenge us. It might be the songs that invite us to praise God with our voices. It might be the familiar pattern of liturgy, what we do and say and how we move in worship. Studies say that the friendliness of the people and the quality of the preaching are usually what attract visitors to come back. Do they feel at home? Is this a group of people with whom they can connect to God? Do the words spoken help them express their love for God?

Liturgy means the work of the people. The church, of course, is not the building; it's the people working together to bring about the kingdom of God. Another way to say this is to talk about the movement that brings us from adoring God to serving humanity.

Adoring takes some risk. Adoring, as we said, is by definition in the extreme! If you adore skiing you'll want to take one more run before the lifts close—like the time I went down one more run at Homewood: It was icy and shadows were falling on the slopes. When I got to the top of the chair lift, the intermediate run was closed for the day, so I had to traverse over to the far side of the mountain and take the black diamond run. That was a mistake. It was a treacherous—really a wild ride. I wasn't prepared for it. I kick-turned and side slipped and fell, got up and kick-turned and side slipped and fell...thinking surely I would never walk away from that slope. If only the ski patrol would come help me! Finally with relief I made it—all the way down the slope alone. The whole thing was pretty crazy. But it was so beautiful on the mountain, looking down at Lake Tahoe. Being on top of that mountain—I'll never forget it. It was a risk I should never have taken—but I would do it again to get in one more run.

When we adore something, we take risks. It may be totally foolish. When we adore someone, we throw out all the rules. They don't matter. When we adore someone we don't care about personal risk or reputation. We are in the moment.

In Bethany, where Lazarus lived, his sister Martha had cooked the dinner. Jesus was there, and Judas was there. The men were eating with Lazarus. Then Lazarus's sister Mary did something a little crazy. One would have expected her to help with the dishes. And then one would have expected her to sit quietly in the background while the men talked after dinner. But no, she got up and took a pound of nard—a costly perfume—and poured it on Jesus' feet and then unclasped her hair and let it fall on her shoulders, and then she wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. She was powerfully drawn to this man and nothing stopped her — she just poured out her love! It was an act of adoration.

The portrayal of Judas as the one who was stingy about the cost of the perfume, and would later betray Jesus, is a portrayal set in contrast against Mary and her act of generous love. Jesus affirms Mary and says to Judas, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." But Mary couldn't wait to use it. In her moment of great love, she fetched the perfume and poured it out while she could look into Jesus' eyes and feel his warm feet and wipe them with her hair.

In the Gospel of Luke, this story is different. The woman is a prostitute, later through the centuries thought to be Mary Magdalene, washing Jesus' feet with her tears. Many have said that the woman knelt at Jesus' feet repenting for her sins. And yet, there is no indication that Mary Magdalene was this prostitute. And if you study the historical period, you could easily conclude that the tears of this woman were tears of suffering, for many women have been forced into prostitution out of poverty and oppression. In the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't talk about sin. And in both Gospels, he accepts the woman's adoration as a gift.

Bishop Leontine Kelly, the first African-American, woman bishop in The United Methodist Church, preached a sermon on this text from John, where Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anoints Jesus' feet with perfume. In her sermon she told a story of her own history.

“As children [she and her] brothers were in the basement of the Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church parsonage in Cincinnati, Ohio, where her father was the pastor. There they uncovered the entrance to a tunnel. Around the dinner table, [Bishop Kelly, when she was a little girl,] heard [her] father tell the story of the Underground Railroad, that amazing instrument of God, [she called it,] weaving people together from the Southern states of this country to Canada, from the coast of Virginia to the heart of Iowa. People who opposed slavery and who were slaves, largely without knowing one another, formed a vital network of justice and good will enabling slaves to move toward freedom. The African American Spiritual, "Steal Away to Jesus," which accompanied the risky escapes, spoke of a faith that was tested, tried and proven true.

Bishop Kelly once shared this story at a meeting in Virginia, and a 91-year-old man came up to her, embraced her and said he wished he could take her home with him. He was a Quaker. "In my barn," he stated, "there is a wagon with a false bottom. It belonged to my great grandfather. He was a conductor on the Underground Railroad. His run was from Dayton, Ohio to Cincinnati and back....Maybe your house was one of his stops"(from "One Thing Needed," http://day1.org/794-the_one_thing_needed).

It gave Bishop Kelly goose bumps to hear this. At first I was puzzled about why Bishop Kelly told this story in her sermon about the woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Then I thought about how Mary's radical act of adoration has a social application too. How radical it was for the people of Ohio to hide slaves running to freedom on the Underground Railroad. It took risk, setting aside all the rules to adore in the extreme. What an act of courage and witness of love!

There was a story on NPR about a 31-year-old New York City social worker named Julio Diaz. Diaz customarily followed the same routine each evening. He ended his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night, as Diaz stepped off the No. 6 train and onto a nearly empty platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the boy his wallet. As his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy, and asked, "Why are you doing this?"

Diaz replied, "Well, if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I

guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner... and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome." ...Remarkably, the boy agreed, and the unlikely pair walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Shortly the manager came by, then the [guy who washed the dishes] came by, and then the waiters came by to greet Dias. The kid was like, "You know everybody here. Do you own this place?"

"No," Diaz replied, "I just eat here a lot."

The boy responded, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher."

"Well, haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?" Diaz asked him.

"Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the boy said.

The social worker saw an opening. He asked the boy what he wanted out of life. The boy just had a [sort of] sad look on his face. He couldn't answer--or he didn't want to.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the kid, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."

The kid "didn't even think about it" and handed over the wallet. So, Dias gave him \$20... he figured maybe it would help him.... But Diaz asked for something in return, and the boy gave it to him. It was his knife. (Robert Dunham "Which Comes First: Grace or Repentance?" <http://day1.org/1759-which-comes-first-grace-or-repentance>).

Diaz took a big risk. He did it because he believed the kid could change. He did it out of love, a kind of love in the extreme.

One more love story today—A man named John Newton was the captain of a ship that was active in the African slave trade in the 1700s. On a homeward voyage, with the ship packed with slaves headed to England, Newton was trying to steer the ship through a terrible storm. He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, "Lord, have mercy upon us." Later in his cabin he reflected on what he had said and began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm and that grace had begun to work for him. Later Newton became a minister in the Church of England and then wrote the song "Amazing Grace," and finally he spoke out against slavery before he died.

Newton wrote this favorite hymn, "Amazing Grace," out of adoration for God, who saved him and who inspired him to change his ways.

It's risky business to adore God—it changes our lives and the lives of our brothers and sisters.