

St. Paul's United Methodist Church
2111 Carlton Avenue
Colorado Springs, CO 80909
Email: stpaulscs@comcast.net

Phone: 719-634-7046
Fax: 719-634-4752
Visit us on the web:
stpaulsumc-coloradosprings.org



Grounded in Tradition, Growing in Faith



LENTEN REFLECTIONS 2021

By Pastor Leslie

Influenced by

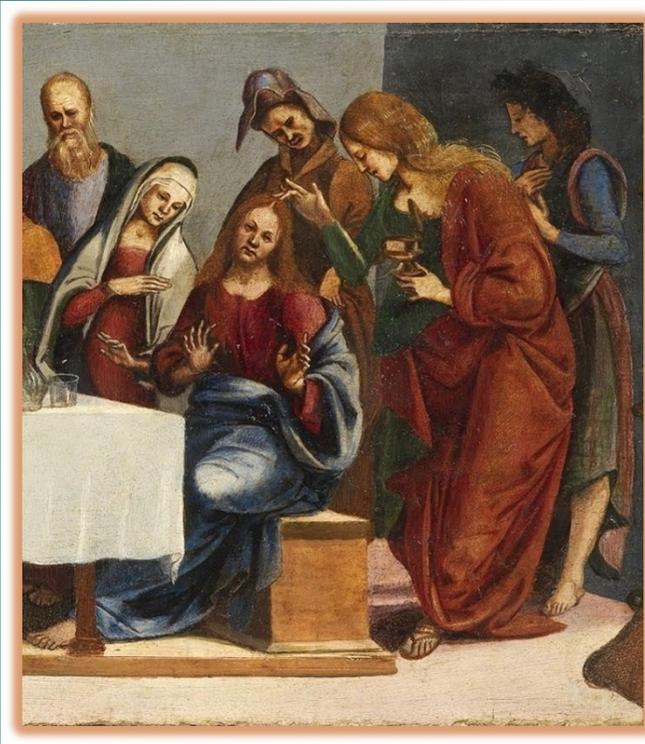
Entering the Passion of Jesus:

A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week

by author, professor, and biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine

Fourth Week of Lent

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Signorelli, Luca, 1441?-1523. Anointing the Feet of Jesus in the House of Simon, the Pharisee, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=56162> [retrieved March 10, 2021]. Original source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luca_Signorelli_-_Christ_in_the_House_of_Simon_the_Pharisee_-_National_Gallery_of_Ireland_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Luca_Signorelli_-_Christ_in_the_House_of_Simon_the_Pharisee_-_National_Gallery_of_Ireland_(1).jpg).

Day 23, March 15th

While He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on His head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone..."
(Mark 14:3-6a, NRSV)

It had to happen that Sunday. The pastors were away from the church. I was not yet a pastor. I don't even think that I had started seminary yet. I was, however, left "in charge" of the service that Sunday morning. Someone approached me between services. "Leslie, a couple of men are outside asking to see the pastor."

With some hesitancy, I went outside to talk to the men. One was sitting behind the wheel of an old pick-up truck. The other stepped out to speak to me. He told me his tale. His wife was pregnant back in Tyler, Texas. ("Tyler!" I thought. That is practically my hometown!) He had come up to Wyoming for a job. It didn't work out. He was out

of money. Out of options. His wife went into labor back home. He was driving back home to be with her, when his truck ran out of gas in Colorado Springs. He didn't have any money to get it fixed. The guy in the pick-up had offered to bring him to the church to get some help.

I was uncertain. Can his story be true? I mean...why on earth would he add that detail about Tyler, Texas?...I gave him \$40.

"You do realize he's probably going to buy some booze with that, don't you?" More than one person said that to me afterwards. They were probably right (weird coincidental Tyler, TX reference notwithstanding).

In Mark's telling of the Jesus' anointing, a strange woman in Bethany enters the home of "Simon the leper", with whom Jesus was having dinner. Again, uninvited. She breaks open a very, very expensive jar of scented oil; extravagantly pours it on Jesus' head as an act of anointing. The cost of that oil, or nard, was enough to feed a family for a whole year!

It took about two beats for the complaining to begin. People, other unidentified dinner guests, began to gripe. "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor!" They condemn the

woman for her lavishly generous act.

Was she wrong to act so boldly and excessively in her adoration? Was I wrong to choose to give that man my \$40 whole dollars? Maybe. Maybe there was a more sensible way to show the same act of care. (I've learned a few ways to "carefully care" since that day.) I've wrestled with this question a lot in similar situations. Usually, there is a degree of guilt involved, because I'm never quite sure if I've chosen the best way to care for the "least of these" that I encounter...whether their story is legitimate or not.

The people at the table judged the woman. Some, I think, even judged Jesus for allowing her to do what she did. But Jesus? He didn't judge. He didn't even suggest a better, more sensible way to care. He alludes to Deuteronomy 15:11. "*You will always have the poor with you. You will always have the opportunity to care for others. So, don't be stingy...*" His response suggests that giving...and sometimes even giving extravagantly...is necessary if I am to be His follower. Yes. There are usually more prudent ways to care. But I shouldn't worry if my extravagance exceeds my good sense sometimes. Sometimes, that is just what is needed for someone to experience the merciful love of God.

Prayer: Lord, help me to care for those who You care for. Help me to trust Your guidance for the right way to do that.

Day 24, March 16th

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

(Mark 14:6-9, NRSV)

Darla Cornish. She was my closest friend when I attended college at the University of Texas. Darla called herself an agnostic. I didn't even know what that meant. I had to ask my mom! At that time in her life, Darla wasn't quite sure what she really believed about God. Now, that shocked me at first. Coming from my naïve little small-town bubble, if you had asked me, I would have said "EVERYBODY believes in God. And, unless you were Jewish or Muslim, then you were a Christian. And since I didn't know any Jewish or Muslim folks, then in my mind pretty much everybody was a Christian!)

But then, I met Darla and became close friends with her...and realized I had been wrong. At first it made me a little uneasy. But then, I started noticing things about Darla. I started noticing how, if someone needed a listening ear, Darla was right there to listen without ego or judgment. If a disabled person needed a helping hand, Darla was always the first, sometimes the only, one to step forward and offer hers...while everyone else stood around looking uncomfortable (including me!). If someone was being bullied, Darla didn't hesitate to step in for their defense. If someone was being marginalized because they were different in some way, Darla would be the first to extend welcome and friendship...and dignity.

At some point it occurred to me, I learned more about what it means to BE a Christian from Darla, a young woman who didn't even know if she believed in God or not, than I did any of my Christian friends. For me, it was first a lesson in humility...and then a lesson about the

mysterious and expansive nature of God...and God's love.

When the other dinner guests started criticizing, and Jesus came to the defense of the unnamed woman who anointed His head with very, very expensive oil (in Mark's account), He was saying, essentially, "Knock it off! You need to get off your high horse! She's anointed my body before its burial." What a strange observation. If she understood that to be true, then it suggests something profound. He had been predicting His death. Somehow, some way, this unnamed woman, this stranger, this outsider, had heard and believed what He said would happen.

On the other hand, no one else in Jesus' inner circle, none of His disciples or His regular followers yet understood - or accepted - that Jesus would die...and soon! Peter, James and John fell asleep in Gethsemane when they were supposed to have His back while he prayed. ALL the disciples fled in confusion, chaos and terror when He was arrested.

Sometimes, it seems, we can learn a lot from an "outsider"...if only we don't reject them automatically simply because they are outside of our comfort zones. We learn a lot about courageous faith from this unnamed woman in the story. I learned a lot about God's quiet workings and prevenient grace from Darla, my agnostic friend. I can never presume to know who God will use to reach me. I can also never underestimate the impact - for good or bad - that my influence has on others who need to know how much God loves them. I need to get off my high horse. I need an extra dose of humility, I think.

Prayer: Lord, help me to welcome all those You send across my path. Help me to see You at work in all people. And I mean all.

Day 25, March 17th

The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread...(1 Corinthians 11:23, NIV)

I say it at least once a month. "On the night He was betrayed..."

I couldn't wait until Confirmation Class was over and I could share in Holy Communion for the first time. Even back then, when I was 12 years old and life was feeling confusing and my faith was still pretty simplistic, I could sense that there was something special - sacred - about Holy Communion. So, I was delighted when I finally reached the age and the proper doctrine was satisfied that allowed me to be a part of that illusive "club".

That said...while I couldn't wait to go through the motions, I never paid much attention to the words themselves. That is, I noticed the symbolism of the bread and the wine - or rather, Welches Grape Juice - even though I didn't yet understand its full significance. But I never really paid attention to the beginning. "On the night He was betrayed..." All that did for me was locate Jesus' Last Supper on the night before His crucifixion.

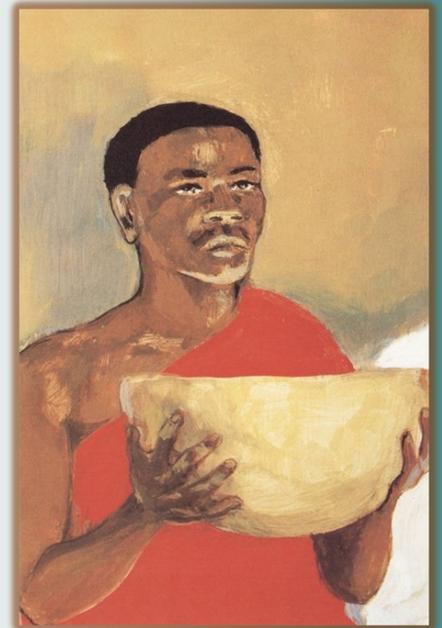
As a matter of fact, it wasn't until I was reading Amy-Jill Levine's scholarship on this passage that I learned that there was more in this brief beginning than just a setting marker. That means...I just learned the nuance of this beginning two days ago! (I'm always up for learning new things.)

The beginning of the Communion liturgy comes from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, before weaving in elements from the gospels' accounts of the Last Supper. Paul uses a word, *paradidomi*. We read that as "betrayed." The literal meaning, however, is to "hand over." Paul never mentions anything about Jesus being betrayed. In fact, Amy-Jill Levine explains, "when Paul uses the term *paradidomi* in relation to the cross, it is *always* God who "hands Jesus over" or "delivers Jesus" to death." For Paul, there was no betrayal. So, there was "no need for a Judas."¹

Well, if that's the case, then how do I wrestle with what Judas' story has to teach me? Judas, no doubt, was a critical character in the Last Supper in all four gospels (all of which were written after Paul's letter to the Corinthians, by the way). What's more, from Mark (the first gospel written) to John (the last gospel written), Judas became increasingly more malicious. Why would that happen? It feels like an escalating tension...and an escalating need to make him more and more the bad guy.

The gospel writers all used the word *paradidomi* in their account, as well. But for them, Judas was the one doing the "handing over." For them, the "handing over" was a betrayal by a fellow disciple...moreso than a pre-determined sacrificial act by a loving God.

Maybe the gospel writers needed a patsy. Maybe it just felt too big for them, still, to consider that Judas' action of "handing over" Jesus was less a betrayal and more the working out of



JESUS MAFA. Detail of Jesus from the Lord's Supper, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48298> [retrieved March 10, 2021]. Original source: <http://www.librairie-emmanuel.fr> (contact page: <https://www.librairie-emmanuel.fr/contact>).

God's plan. It makes me feel a little uneasy, to be honest. Maybe that's because, for me, too, it's easier to demonize Judas. Make him the evil fall guy rather than the instrument for God's greatest act of love.

My brother once asked me "Did Judas have a choice?" I don't really know the answer to that. But I do know that it helps to remember that Jesus never excluded Judas from any of His expressions of grace. Judas received the same acts of love as the rest of the disciples. I believe Jesus would have extended the same mercy as He had to the rest of the disciples too, but Judas was too broken to dare to hope for that.

Has my understanding of who Judas was and what motivated him been skewed? Do I need a patSY too, because sometimes God's mysterious ways are too much for me to handle? Do I do the same with people today? Sometimes, do my perceptions of people start out wrong and grow "wronger"? Is that because it's easier for me to judge someone, than it is for me to recognize how God is at work within that person? This isn't easy stuff. Yet, Scripture invites me - perhaps even demands - that I set aside what I think I already know. Look deeper to learn more about Jesus. About God. About faith. Get out of my own way and risk being challenged - and changed - in the way I understand people. And God. And myself.

Prayer: Mysterious God, help me to understand You better every day. Even when it's uncomfortable, I pray I never stop learning about You and Your ways.

³Levine, Amy-Jill, Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), p115

Day 26, March 18th

The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25, NIV)

I was 36 years old the first time I made the connection between Christ's body and the Body of the universal Church that melds and molds together at the Communion Table. I was at a Walk to Emmaus spiritual retreat, and the gathering room was filled with notes from people all over the world who were praying for us. I felt so connected to people I didn't know. Would never see. And as we shared communion throughout the weekend, it struck me how those same people - from ALL OVER THE WORLD -- were sharing in the same meal. Worshiping the same God. Being renewed by the same Savior. It was powerful.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is blunt. "*Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on Him at His death*" (1 Corinthians 11:27-28, The Message). Whoa! Now granted, Paul was writing to a church in disarray, where the wealthy and privileged in the church were using, among other things, the communion meal to lord it over the poor and underprivileged members of the church. Paul wasn't pulling any punches. Still. That seems a pretty harsh statement to me. (Sorry, Paul.)

For me, the communion table is the Table of Grace. The act of sharing communion is an act of grace renewal. Jesus wants us to remember His sacrifice because it is a life-giving sacrifice, for me and for the community of the faithful all over the world. It is a place of restoration and a moment of connection.

So, I think, in his blunt way, that was exactly what Paul was saying. This Table, this moment of shared remembrance, should always be a table of reconciliation, restoration, renewal. I think that was what Paul was saying because that was what Jesus was intending when He said, "Remember." I am a part of the Body that melds and molds together at the Table of Grace. When I come to the Table, I am renewed by God's grace. Yes. But I should also be willing to set aside the things inside of me that cause division. Judgment. Self-righteousness. Resentment. Bitterness. Grudges. Xenophobia. If I am not willing to do that, then I mock the very act of sacrificial love that made such grace possible.

Prayer: Lord of immense grace, I desire to let divisive things go...but it isn't always easy. I can't do it on my own. Make me a slate that You wipe clean, so that Your Table of Grace is always my place of renewed life with You and neighbor.



Paynter, David, 1900-1975. Jesus washing the disciples' feet, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57351> [retrieved March 10, 2021]. Original source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trinity_College_Chapel_Mural_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trinity_College_Chapel_Mural_(2).jpg).

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God; so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. (John 13:1-5, NIV)

My friend, John, was dying of cancer. The day before his passing, we went to visit him. He was not communicating by that point. We knew that the end was near. Barb, his wife, told us a story that day, of other friends who had come to visit him just a few days prior. When they arrived, John told them to sit. He went and poured a bowl of warm water, then he took a towel and got down on his knees and washed their feet. It was his last act of gratitude and love for their friendship.

I was stunned with emotion when I heard the story. It was so beautifully shocking, yet not surprising at all...knowing my friend, John.

When Jesus took the basin of water, and the towel, then bent down and washed His disciples' feet, they were stunned as well. For them, though, it was less an emotional moment than it was an uncomfortable moment. Foot washing was a common

thing in 1st Century Palestine. The dusty roads and minimal footwear meant dirty feet in need of a good cleansing. Often - usually - the ones tasked with washing the feet of those who entered a home were the slaves. The lowest ones on the social strata. The lord, the master, the rabbi would never be the one to wash feet.

Yet here Jesus was, their Lord, their Master, their Rabbi, down in front of them like a common slave, washing the dirt of the day off of their feet. It was unthinkable (as expressed by Peter's very vocal resistance). The very idea turned Peter's "world topsy-turvy." I imagine the other disciples were equally as shocked, perhaps even ashamed to let Jesus wash their feet.

Peter's head must have been spinning. "This won't happen! This CAN'T happen! There's an order to things. It keeps the world running smoothly, the way things are supposed to run. Rabbi, you can't do this. Rabbi...You can't really expect ME to do this to others!?!"

"But Peter, don't you see. I must. And you must...if you really want to follow me. This is what true meekness, true humility, true love, looks like. This is my way. This is GOD'S way."

Jesus said "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. (John 13:34, NIV)

Just a few minutes later, continuing the conversation - the teaching - Jesus would say "I AM the way. The truth. The life." (John 14:6, NIV)

When I first understood the context of this story, my own world turned a little topsy-turvy. I always assumed Jesus was teaching two things here in this passage. One how to act. Another

how to believe. But He's not. With His act of meekness...humility...service, Jesus tells me "Leslie, this is my way. This is LOVE's way. This is God's way. When you follow me in my way, in love's way, you find God."

My friend, John, got this, long before me. His faith, his friendship, his gratitude was stripped bare, until all that was left was his love. He was following in Jesus' way...and he followed Jesus all the way to God.

Prayer: Servant Lord, may I follow You as my friend followed You. May I follow as You taught me. May I find God waiting.



For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:27, NIV)

I will call her "Sue".

I entered Sue's room. She was sitting on the side of her bed. She looked sad. Lonely. I introduced myself. "I'm from Spiritual Care. Would you like a visit." Sue's face brightened. We began to talk. She told me her story. "Would you like me to pray for you?" I asked?

"Yes. I would like that very much," Sue replied.

"Do you mind if I hold your hands while we pray?" She reached out to me, and I took her hands and prayed. When the prayer was over, Sue's eyes were no longer sad. "Thank you," she said, and her voice sounded relieved.

I sensed someone behind me. A nurse was at the door, quietly watching...at the room, but not in it. "Oh, I'm sorry. Do you need to see Sue?"

"No," she responded. "I need to see you."

I sensed immediately that I had done something wrong. As I left the room the nurse took me by the arm and gently, but firmly, began guiding me down the hall toward a sink. "Did you see the signs on Sue's door?" I hadn't notice. (I was a newbie, not yet accustomed to reading the doors before entering patients' rooms.)

"Sue has CDiff. She is very contagious. You should have worn a gown and gloves when you were visiting her. Now, wash your hands thoroughly. If you begin to feel sick overnight, call your doctor...and stay away from other people!"

I did not get sick...thankfully. But, I learned two lessons that day. 1) Always read the signs on the doors. The messages are there for a reason. And, 2) Human touch, along with attentive kindness, can give someone a glimpse of God's love that can turn despair into hope.

That was the point Jesus was making. "Who would be the greatest?," His disciples wondered.

"It's not who you might think," Jesus told them.

Those who are truly great, are the ones willing to serve. And Jesus wasn't just talking about service from a distance, helpfulness with no engagement. To serve as He serves is to touch. Make contact. Listen intently. Really see a person. Christlike "service is up close and personal; service means getting off one's high horse and manifesting meekness and humility. More, this type of service involves intimacy...It teaches us that we are not the important ones: the ones we serve are the ones who are important."²

I was thankful that I did not catch CDiff. However, I will never be upset that I sat with Sue. Saw her. Heard her. Held her hand. It turned her bleak day into a bright one. I think Jesus met her in that moment.

I am sure that there are plenty of times when I miss an opportunity to see. Listen. Touch. Make a connection. I hope, though, that I continue to get better at noticing the signs of need that are all around me - and I am never afraid to engage.

Prayer: Healing Lord, help me to recognize the need around me. Help me to serve with Your Spirit, to turn bleakness to brightness, despair to hope.

²Levine, Amy-Jill, Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), p124