

5 Lent April 3, 2022
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

“We Don’t Talk About....”
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

They are found in every family; company; school; church; every community has that one person who just doesn’t seem to fit. Because that person wants to talk about the thing no one else does.

I’m not talking about the person who isn’t on board with changes for a company, family, church, or institution. I’m talking about someone like Mirabel, the character in the animated movie *Encanto*, who feels like she doesn’t fit in with her extraordinary family. For those of you who have yet to watch *Encanto*, it’s a wonderful story that takes place in a fictional valley in Colombia about a family that lives in a magical house and almost every everyone has a miraculous, magical gift. One family member has power over the weather, one can heal a wound with magical food, another has superhuman strength, another can change their appearance, another can produce flowers from nothing, another can understand and talk to animals. Each member of the family received their gift when they reached a certain age, everyone except Mirabel. But being different didn’t stop Mirabel from loving her family. She loved them so much, she was not afraid to point out there was one family member no one talked about: her uncle Bruno, the one with the gift to see into the future. The more she insisted on finding out why he was no longer around and why no one wanted to talk about him, the more the magic of her family started to fade and crumble. Out of fear of losing their home and place in their community, the matriarch, Abuela, blamed Mirabel for the family’s fading powers. When the two characters finally confronted each other, the house literally fell apart around them.

Only then did Abuela tell Mirabel about the real cause for the tension in the family: the deep pain of grief that made her want to hold on tightly to her family’s magic. Once Mirabel learned the truth behind the tension everyone else had ignored, she could help Abuela and her family see that the real magic wasn’t the gifts of the individual family members, it was the love Abuela had for her family, love that even the loss of her husband and her home could not extinguish. It is that love that built the foundation of their magical home. And even though that home had been broken by fear, Mirabel reminded Abuela there is nothing love cannot heal.

This is why we need people like Mirabel in our families, churches, schools, workplaces. We need those people who are not afraid of the unspoken tensions that often reveal both truth and hope. That could be why the author of John’s Gospel included the incident we just heard involving Mary, the sister of Martha

and Lazarus of Bethany. Her action of anointing Jesus' feet with a ridiculously expensive ointment and drying them with her hair was her way of doing what Mirabel did for her family: naming the unspoken thing in the house.

To better appreciate what Mary did, we need to remember we are in John's Gospel today, and every Gospel has its differences. These differences are not bad; they don't mean none of this happened. Instead, the differences point to how those who followed Jesus interpreted their experiences with him. For example: a woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume happens in all four Gospels. However, only in John's Gospel is this act done by someone Jesus knows; someone who has sat at his feet and listened to him, a friend whose family provided a place of rest for Jesus. Someone whose name we know.

This is not an unnamed woman interrupting a dinner party of prestigious people entertaining Jesus. This is a friend and family member who has been paying attention and can see what is ahead for Jesus. Maybe they all could, but no one wanted to talk about it.

The timing of Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is important. It takes place after her brother Lazarus had gotten sick and she and Martha had sent word to Jesus to come heal their brother. If you remember, Jesus intentionally did not come in time and Lazarus died. His sisters mourned. They prepared his body for burial. They buried him in a tomb and a stone was rolled over the entrance. Several days later, Jesus finally showed up and the two sisters did not hesitate to tell Jesus what they thought of his timing. If only he had come sooner, their brother would still be alive. Jesus responded to their grief with gentleness and compassion. He didn't tell them to stop crying because he was there to save the day. Instead, he talked about resurrection, his resurrection, and he wept.

Then, he commanded the stone to be rolled away from the tomb, for Lazarus to come out and for the community to remove the clothing of death he was still dressed in. In John's Gospel, this miracle is one that not only points to what is about to happen to Jesus, it points to how Jesus' death is going to have a deeper impact on all life through his resurrection.

For his family and friends, Lazarus' restoration of life must have been a lot to process. It was a good and joyful thing, to be sure, but it also meant nothing would ever really be the same. They couldn't just go back to the way things were before by pretending Lazarus had never died and they had not grieved. His death and restoration changed all their lives. But what that change would look like in their daily life, they would just have to figure out for themselves one day at a time.

In addition, the news of Lazarus' miraculous restoration of life spread far and wide. It traveled all the way to the religious and political leaders of the time who were so afraid of this news they began to plan how they were going to end Jesus and his ministry for good.

In the meantime, Jesus and his disciples were at a dinner at the home of his friends who were learning how to live again with the gift of life restored in their midst. Lazarus was at the table just like before, but it must have been different somehow. Martha was serving just like before, but it must have been different somehow. Something joyful was in their midst, and something else loomed on the horizon. Mary, who had listened at Jesus' feet and fallen to his feet in her grief at the death of her brother, took initiative to call out that tension not with words but with action that once more brought her to Jesus' feet.

She took a container of expensive perfume made of nard, a substance scholars and historians tell us was used for anointing dead bodies at the time of burial, and might have been left over from Lazarus' burial, and poured it all over Jesus' feet. Nard is so potently fragrant, it overpowered the smell of food, people, and anything else in the house; filling it instead with a fragrance that reminded everyone of the rituals of death. No one would have been able to ignore it, and everyone would be participating in Mary's unusual ritual whether they wanted to or not. Everyone would have to acknowledge what Mary was recognizing: that Jesus was not long for this world.

Of course, just like every family has that person who is not afraid to name the unspeakable thing in the room, every group has that one person who is going to fight, resist, or reject it. Often by simply pretending nothing has changed, which can cause conflict. In today's Gospel reading it was Judas who complained Mary was stinking up the place with selfish ignorance and refusal to help those in need. This is an often-used tactic to try and redirect away from whatever makes us uncomfortable. That the author of John's Gospel gave a lengthy explanation of why Judas reacted the way he did, scholars tell us, is evidence that Jesus' followers struggled to understand why Judas eventually betrayed Jesus.

Regardless of Judas' feelings about the situation, we heard Jesus understood what Mary was doing, and he seemed to have appreciated it. Perhaps, as some scholars suggest, it even inspired him.

Knowing that this would be her last visit with Jesus before everything changed, Mary chose to show Jesus what she believed, what she had learned, how she was different after all that had happened with her brother. Jesus was about to start his longest journey, the one that would lead him to death and beyond. He would suffer, and die, and somehow change death forever. So, she

anointed his feet as she would those of a dead person because Jesus walked wherever he went. And she dried his feet with her hair as an act of love to show love is what is going to change death. Not her love for Jesus, but God's love that is Jesus. Because Jesus would change death and therefore life, she anointed him before he died.

Perhaps Mary's action touched Jesus so deeply, that when he gathered for the last time with his disciples, he followed her example by washing his disciples' feet and drying them with a towel and then giving a new commandment to love each other as Jesus loved them. Perhaps Mary inspired Jesus to teach about the love of God by embodying that love in washing each other's feet, much like Mirabel inspired her family to let the love that founded their family be embodied in shared work and support.

Mary's extraordinary insight and courage might inspire us today. When it feels like we are being forced to pretend nothing has changed, to push forward and make everything from school to church to workplaces to entertainment or restaurants like they were before an extraordinary event like the pandemic without acknowledging grief or change, it can cause tension and anxiety worse than the pandemic itself. Mary and Mirabel show us it is not only okay to acknowledge with tenderness, love, and compassion the tension and discomfort in the world, that is where we can find the healing and hope we all need, because that is also where we will find God.