

“Nothing like a Good Shower”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

If you ever need a book on spiritual growth and development, you grab one by a man named Henri Nouwen. It doesn't matter [which one]. He has written a lot of them and they are all wonderful. He tells a story in one of them, titled *Spiritual Direction*. It is a story about a Zen master who was walking along the road one day many years ago and he ran across a young man who was searching diligently for peace, for enlightenment. He had searched for truth and joy and the right way of living everywhere he could find, and he never found his soul satisfied.

So after many years of traveling and many diverse experiences he finally came across this Zen master. He was awed by the stories the Zen master shared with other people. He was excited by the meeting that filled his heart just listening to this wonderful master. So he went up and fell at the master's feet and begged him, “Would you please let me follow you? Would you be my teacher?”

So the Zen master said, “Alright, get up,” and he made the young man his personal secretary. The young man followed him around for three years. He watched him care for other people, respond to them; sit and counsel with them.

But this young man became very frustrated over time because, over and over again, the Zen master would speak to everyone except the secretary. This person [young man] who had even asked if he could learn at the master's feet, seemed to be ignored by him [the Zen master].

So one day after three long years, the young man went to the Zen master and he said, “That's it. I can take no more. You have spent time with everyone but me. Why is it that, over and over again, you will counsel with anybody who shows up to talk to you, yet you ignore me day after day after day?”

The Zen master was put off. He didn't know what to think. He said, “Don't you understand that I have been teaching you each and every day that you have been with me? When you bring me a cup of tea, do I not say, ‘thank you’? When you bow to me, do I not bow in return? When you clean my desk do I not also appreciate it?”

Now this really confused the young man because what do serving tea and bowing to each other and cleaning this guy's desk have to do with spiritual enlightenment? The young man could just not grasp what the master was saying. Suddenly the master was so frustrated he just turned and yelled at the young secretary and said, “When you see, you see direct.” In that moment the young man understood and received enlightenment.

It isn't about the words that teach - it is about the actions. It is about watching, listening and learning through the master's example. That is what Mary understood. She listened to Jesus while Martha was out in the kitchen doing all of the busy work. She [Mary] listened; while Judas Iscariot judged. She wanted to know who Jesus was and take that example into her heart.

Now this young man's story has unspoken urgent questions. He wanted to know things like what is truth? How do I find joy and happiness? What is the right way of living? To his questions we can each add one of our own. Each one of us has a different question that we are asking God. We may not have formed the question, but we feel it in our heart. What do I do with my life now, after an illness or a job change or the loss of a spouse? Whom shall I marry? Where shall I live? What do I do with my loneliness? Why am I so needy; needing attention, approval or power? How can I overcome my fears, my shames, my addictions, and my sense of inadequacy or failure? Each one of us has those underlying questions. It is important that we first figure out what those questions are that speak to me personally, to you personally, and then ask God to help you answer them because that is what brings mercy and peace.

In our Gospel lesson today, Judas was in the midst of the Master, right at the feet of Jesus every single day, but he was as blind as the Zen master's secretary. Frustrated, Judas didn't see and didn't learn, didn't convey - didn't receive - what Jesus was conveying to him. But on the other hand there is Mary listening, loving and appreciating the Master - Jesus - and wanting to emulate his life. Certainly she has received the gift of life because she received, literally, life from death when her brother Lazarus was raised from the tomb.

But Mary also saw the gift of wisdom that Jesus gave her every single day, and recognized that mercy and grace. It was with overwhelming gratitude that Mary responds. Now if you just read the Scripture passage you may miss it. There is a lot going on in that little paragraph.

First of all, when Jesus allowed her to put that perfume on him he was risking a lot, because she did it inappropriately according to the societal norms of the times. Taking that pound of nard - which was about a half-year's salary, by today's standard about \$25,000-\$30,000, she just dumped it on his feet. I would have been like Judas [to say]: "What in the name of all that is holy are you doing? You know what we could have done with that money?"

I would have missed out. I would have been just like Judas and missed the meaning of what Jesus was allowing her to do, and what she understood. She wanted to celebrate the great joy in her midst while she had him. Whether she knew it, or felt it, she knew at some level that she wouldn't have him much longer, and she needed to cherish every last second she had with him; she learned that wisdom.

But she also, with great humility, humiliated herself in the eyes of the world because when she wiped that oil on his feet with her hair, she did something horrendous. By the time a child became a woman in that society there was a special thing. Either when you got married or were of a certain age, your hair, as a woman, was wrapped up tight and not allowed to come down. The only time you wore your hair long was at home with your husband or, if you were a prostitute, and you tried to entice a man by dropping your hair.

So, for Mary to allow her hair to drop in front of all of these men - including Judas - and use her hair to wipe the ointment on his feet, she was creating a scandal. But it didn't matter to her because she wanted to show Jesus in that moment the love she had. He was not her husband - he was more than that. He was her Lord. He was her master. He was the essence of God. And to be anything but intimate with him would have felt more inappropriate than dropping her hair.

There was nothing to be ashamed of in her mind. There was nothing that should separate her from him. It didn't matter what anyone else thought. She had to be in that presence with him in the most loving, intimate way, committed way she could find, and that included the physical act of dropping her hair. Nothing should separate us from that deep emotional bond that comes with Jesus.

Mary listened and was molded. She allowed Jesus to give her so much that she wanted to give back, to shower him with that fragrance, and she just wanted to give him something, *everything* of herself. For you and me, we can feel in those moments how desperately we want to give Jesus something back that is meaningful and truly ourselves. The question is how we do we do it? So now Henri Nouwen continues with another story to help us learn how to offer back, and give back, for all that Christ has given us in mercy and grace.

He tells this cute little story about the lion and the marble. One day a little boy was going along and he watched a sculptor. It was so interesting because it was just this big block of marble. The little boy was interested for a little while, because the sculptor had to be really strong. He had big muscles, because he would take this pick and hammer, and hit on it. You had to have a great deal of strength to chip even the smallest part of the marble away. The marble would fly and it looked like a big mess, so after a little while the boy got bored - as we boys tend to do - and he went away with his folks.

Well, weeks later the little boy returned and he got excited as he got closer to where the sculptor was. He [the little boy] wondered if anything had come out of that messy marble. Sure enough, the boy rounded the corner and witnessed the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. That block of messy crumbling marble had turned into the most beautiful sculpture of a lion he had ever seen. The little boy ran away from his parents, he slid under the rope and ran right up to the sculptor, who was nearly done, pulled on his coat and said, "Where did that lion come from?"

The sculptor looked at him and said, "It was in the marble."

The boy said, "I know it was in the marble, but how did it come out of that big block? How did you *do* that?"

The sculptor looked at the little boy and said, "I saw it in the marble, but first I had to see it in my heart. Once I saw it in my heart, then I was able to find it in the marble." The sculptor's answer was that the lion was there in the marble all along.

"I saw it in my own heart. The secret is that the lion that was in my heart," he said to the little boy, "recognized the lion in the marble."

The art of sculpture is first of all, according to Henri Nouwen, the art of seeing. You have to see something before it is fully formed. Discipline is the way to make visible what has been seen all ready in the artist's heart.

Anyone who has ever been a parent - you look at that newborn and wonder who they are going to be - and you realize, with awe and trepidation, that you are like a sculptor and you can make or mar this little creature that you are holding in your hands for the first time. But you also trust - as people of faith - that you are not going to mar this little child too much.

Oh man, when Hannah came along I had one brother two years younger, I didn't have any cousins, so I had no clue how to handle this thing that God had just - or Jill had just - given me. (We will let those two duke out who was in charge of that one.) [Laughter] I was scared to death.

The first baby I think I ever held was one I baptized, and the mom was even scared at the way I held it.

Then you look at your own and you are so scared to death you are going to let the head wobble and the child is going to fall apart and crumble in eighteen pieces. Or that even more so, you are going to mess this thing up and you don't want to, because it is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen in your life, after it stopped changing color.

You get as scared as a parent that you won't be adequate, or up to it. And then you realize that you are going to have to have faith, because it better not just be up to you and your spouse. "I need you, God, like I never needed you before!" I was probably the most intimidated and most in need of faith the day Hannah was born, than at any other moment in my life.

For me it was a joyous moment, but it was also probably one of the most fearful moments of my life. I don't know about you - maybe you had a very different experience - but it humbled and scared me to my core - in a good way - because it forced me to have to rely on God in a way I probably never needed to before. Because, now, I was also one with the pick and hammer, and I wasn't sure what kind of sculptor I would be; but I knew the kind of sculptor God would be and I had better be directed by that hand.

Being formed in the likeness of God involves the struggle to move from absurd living to obedient living. It would have been absurd for me and Jill to try and mold that child into our image. Oh, Good Lord, what that child would have looked like if she had really turned out just like Jill and Scott - it would not have been a pleasant experience. God needed to be in there, God needed to be in our lives and in her heart if she had any chance at being well-formed. The same applies to every one of our children and to each one of us.

The word "absurd" in Latin is the word "sardis," which means deaf. Absurd living means being deaf to God's guidance; being deaf to God's mercy and grace. It will always leave us empty if we do not hear God's word moving through us in the decisions we make.

Judas was deaf to what Jesus was doing. He [Judas] was right there, heard it all, and was still deaf to it. The absurd life is extremely painful because our mistakes are ever before us and everything we try to do ends up wrong. But ultimately when God is there it all works for good; we can choose the exiled life apart from God, or we can live obediently. The word "obedience" in Latin means "to listen." It doesn't mean to talk, and doesn't mean that you have all of the answers; it means to listen.

Judas always talked. Every part of the Gospels that has Judas talking - he has the answer: He is right - right up until he is wrong and he dies. His deafness of spirit killed him, while Mary listened, learned, loved and lived with joy. Judas was like the Zen master's secretary. I can just hear Jesus looking Judas in the eye and screaming the same way, "You see me; you see me direct. I'm right in front of you and you are missing it."

But, Judas would have said, “But I know a better way” - while Mary fell on her knees.

We are called to be washed by the blood of the lamb, to be molded by the master: God. May God allow us to fall on our knees to listen, to be molded, to be restored by God’s mercy and grace, and may we do that by answering the big questions. To go back to the beginning of this: “What is truth? What do you want me to do with my life? Who am I to marry? Why am I feeling so lonely?”

Whatever your questions are, take a little time today and figure them out. Write them down and then pray on them. Remember that you are not doing it alone, this life you are living. God is in you, chipping away at the impurities of life, blessing you anew, washing you clean, so that you can be as close and intimate as Christ wants you to be with him. Embrace him in prayer. Be guided, but listen first, and trust that God will love and keep you, now and always. Amen.