The Woman with the Alabaster Jar

This story is told in every one of the four Gospels, with a few variations, but essentially the same story.

It takes place in Bethany, home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, friends of Jesus. I lived in Bethany for a few months during my sabbatical. It’s still a little Palestinian village – in sight of Jerusalem.

Mark’s version says this dinner was at the home of Simon, a leper. Lepers were ostracized in the time of Jesus. Jesus breaks the rules. He goes to eat at Simon’s house.

A woman appears at the house – and she carries an alabaster jar – an expensive jar – filled with costly, sweet-smelling, perfumed oil – and she breaks the jar and pours the oil on Jesus’ head.

And immediately there was a reaction! Criticism. Some were infuriated! Indignant! What is she doing that for? Breaking a precious jar and wasting all this oil, pouring it on his head! The jar could have been sold. Other things could have been done with the money. They could have used it for the poor.

What a waste! Why?! Why would she do this??

But Jesus says, No! Let her alone! Don’t trouble her. She has done a good thing!
This story spoke to me.

Fast forward from Bethany in Jesus’ time to 1962, to this Motherhouse, home of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

We were 18 or 17 years old at that time. What did we know?

We were following an urge, a sense of call, a desire – a desire that was pretty hard to explain. We wanted to give ourselves to God!

We wanted to take our jar of sweet nard and give it away! To God!!! Whom we felt was somehow drawing us.

There were friends who said Don’t do that! It’s a waste! You could do so much more with your life! Why do you want to do this?

But we entered this room nonetheless, this chapel, and we broke open our lives and began the work of learning what religious life and ministry was all about.

The first two formation directors we had those first two years are with us today: S. Ann Koeble was our Director of Postulants and S. Elizabeth Cashman our Novice Director. They can attest that the 50 of us – there were 50 young women who entered together in 1962 – and our former directors can attest that we were a rowdy bunch! Ann and Elizabeth both worked hard to “form” us. They helped us learn the value of pouring out the oil of our lives on all who came to us in need.

But neither they nor we had any clue at that time what religious life would be in just a few more years.
We entered on Sept. 8, 1962 and just one month later the Second Vatican Council was convened in Rome. The documents that came from that Council were to change our lives.

Our congregation did what the Council asked us to do. We studied the life of our foundress, Elizabeth Ann Seton, and went more deeply into the spirituality that had inspired her life – the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul who in the 17th century, along with Louise de Marillac, had founded the Vincentian priests and the Daughters of Charity, groups of men and women, religious and lay people, who were committed to serving the poor in the cities of France, and finding God among the people in the slums of Paris.

They had a mission similar to the first apostles – to do as Jesus did – to bring the Good News to the poor, to set captives free, to liberate the oppressed, and to do whatever presented itself to them, to do whatever was needed.

Elizabeth Seton and her newly founded congregation of women religious in 1809 followed this Vincentian model and were wonderful examples of what St. James was telling us in our second reading today. They were doers of the Word and not hearers only. James said that religion that is pure is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction. And that’s exactly what the Sisters of Charity did in those early days of our history.
So in 1962 we were encouraged to do what *Jesus* had done, and *Vincent* had done, and *Elizabeth* had done. Look around to what the needs of this day are – and give yourselves in service to new needs as well as the continuing need of serving the poor.

It was a new challenge that Vatican II had given us, and we each in our own ways, immersed ourselves in ministries that were needed. Close at home or afar we followed the continuing call of our God to respond to the needs of the poor – whether they were physical hungers or spiritual hungers, whether they were in classrooms, or soup kitchens, or counseling rooms or congregational offices, or caring for God’s creation, working with Sisters or Associates or women in formation. Whatever needs presented themselves we tried to meet those needs.

It’s been that same urge all along – the love of Christ calling us – to bring the precious jar – and let the oil spill out for all the world.

The jar we carry up to this altar today is a jar that is anything but empty. It is a jar filled with the blessings we have been given, the gifts that are the result of that response we made 50 years ago.

Let me name some of these blessings:

- The blessing of the communal life of sisterhood – We have been surrounded by women who have sistered us, supported us, nourished us, challenged us, loved us into being sisters for others.
- The grace of ministry – to be able to give of ourselves joyfully in the service of others.
- The gift of partners in ministry and life-long friends, men and women who have shared their lives with us.
• And most importantly, the grace of God’s love for us, always there, always outpoured, overflowing, healing, forgiving, and steadfast.

Has it been a waste to give of ourselves to God? Not at all!

God has only turned it around and poured out the sweet-smelling oil of everlasting love on us. What can we say but Thank You, God, for calling us to this life 50 years ago and for the grace to continue to say yes.