

Indecently and Out of Order

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Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-8

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The stereotype about Presbyterians is that our favorite verse is 2 Corinthians 14:40: “do everything decently and in order.” In fact, we have a whole *document* called the “Book of Order,” which sets processes and rules for electing leadership, for dealing with property, for forming councils and committees, for how we should worship on different occasions. I confess that I came to the Presbyterian church relatively recently, and found it comical and slightly head-scratching when I learned that there is a committee to appoint committees.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m a big fan of things being orderly. I was the nine-year-old kid who watched the cookie plate at a birthday party to make sure everyone got seconds before anyone got thirds. And sometimes I have to....well, rein it in when I’m sitting in traffic on the beltway and see another car following the ambulance through gridlock to save a minute or two. That’s not order! I like order! Order helps things to be fair. Order helps provide a space for all voices to be heard. It gives us guidance for the times when things get off the rails. It helps us feel safe and controlled.

There are, though, moments for which no book of order can prepare us. The things so new and unprecedented we don’t have rules for them, like the joy of a reaffirmation of baptism and renaming of a trans person. The things so human and complex they can’t be scripted. Like how to walk alongside people who are fighting cancer or depression or the loss of meaningful work. How to rejoice with someone who’s expecting a baby after a miscarriage and so excited yet so scared, too. Our Book of Order, to its credit, does hold space for these moments, acknowledging that we need to remain open to the fresh workings of the Holy Spirit, not tied to our processes.

Mary of Bethany did not subscribe to the Presbyterian Book of Order, but the religious and cultural customs of her time had their own order. And those orders, I imagine, could do nothing to prepare her for the strange, liminal space she was in just a week before the Passover that year. Because what does order even mean when your brother dies, and your good friend brings him back to life, and yet you still sense the smell of death in the air?

That is, after all, where this story begins. Mary’s brother Lazarus had died of a terrible illness. His sisters Mary and Martha wept and mourned and asked the *what if* questions we all ask. They *knew* an amazing doctor-healer, named Jesus, but he just didn’t get there in time. What if he had arrived sooner? Friends and family came to comfort Mary and Martha. They brought casseroles, cried with them, helped them prepare the body for the funeral day. They buried him.

Four days later Jesus finally showed up, and when he saw Mary weeping, he wept, too. “Why, Jesus?” she asked. And then after he wept with her, he opened the tomb—and instead of the stench of death came only the aromas of the burial perfume—and then Lazarus walked straight out of there. Poof. Just like that. Mary’s brother was back and not even sick anymore.

Of course, that whole turn of events left everyone reeling. The crowds started retelling the story. The authorities were all talking about Jesus. He certainly wasn't doing everything decently and in good order.

It wasn't much time later that Jesus came back to their home for dinner, six days before the Passover. And what do you do when things have been knocked all out of balance, out of order? Most of us try and get back to a sense of normalcy. So Martha cooks dinner and runs around serving everybody, because that's a thing she can do. And Lazarus sits at the table to eat, trying to blend in. And the disciples tag along and Judas makes his usual grumbles.

But Mary. Oh, Mary can't go back to normal. She's always been a bit of a boundary breaker, and now she really feels things out of balance. Perhaps she senses what is coming. She's heard the hints Jesus keeps dropping about an impending sorrow, and she's heard that Jesus is wanted in Jerusalem, and she's been taking it all in. She fears that her brother has escaped death, but that Jesus will not. That the path to wholeness and life will take them through more suffering, first. Perhaps she doesn't quite understand what she is doing or what is coming, just has an inkling that some great gesture is needed. That she wants to demonstrate her willingness to give everything, even her finest possession, for this Jesus and what he stands for which is, after all, good news for the poor, healing for the sick and broken ones.

It is almost as though a Spirit not her own is propelling her to do this wild act. To be indecent and out of order. She takes the finest perfume and walks toward Jesus. It doesn't make sense, what she's about to do, but then, Jesus often doesn't make sense in the framework of order.

If Judas is to be trusted, this oil is worth a year's wages for a manual laborer, something like \$30,000. Maybe she had sold everything she had to buy it, or maybe it had been a gift, or maybe she had been keeping it for years, using only the faintest drops for the most special occasions. She takes it now and pours it on Jesus feet. But it's too much, it's extravagant, it's spilling all over. And so she takes her hair and brushes it.

Maybe some of the men at the table exchange glances. What is happening? Why must she bring the too-familiar smell of burial perfume? Why must women be so emotional? And why is she showing her body inappropriately? A woman's hair should definitely be kept tied back, in order. The fragrance is spreading and Mary's indecency is making people uncomfortable, and Jesus is letting her go on like this—a bit strange. To quell the awkwardness, Judas speaks up. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?"

He doesn't actually care about the poor. He wants to steal the money. But even so. He sounds reasonable, and orderly. "Jesus says to care for the poor, so let's create a budget, write some policy guidelines, have a few meetings. Next year we should be ready to launch a Help the Poor Ministry. We can give a few coins to beggars, we can divvy it up between many widows, we can show our generosity within the orderliness of a project, a system, a program. And surely if a small *committee* provides oversight to this program, Judas will not be able to misuse the money. Judas' idea makes it clear to everyone in the room. Mary's act is totally out of line with the mission of the disciples. Jesus has never wanted lavish gifts for himself. He's always talking

about the poor. This is a waste! This is inappropriate. This is not the way things are done around here, Mary.

But Jesus is going to surprise them. “You always have the poor with you,” he says. “You do not always have me.”

Many modern politicians have used these words to avoid confronting poverty, to suggest that it’s acceptable. But the dinner guests hear his tone and realize he is not condoning a world of inequality. He sounds *grieved* that poverty remains despite God’s long-standing calls to eliminate it. The guests are well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, too, and they know that Jesus is alluding to the Hebrew Scriptures. “You always have the poor with you,” Jesus says, which sounds a lot like God’s words in Deuteronomy 15: “There will never cease to be some in need.” But then it goes on: “I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” It is part of a larger section of the law about the Jubilee- an end to all debt every 7 years, a systemic way of approaching poverty. Not Judas’ little way of collecting some money and handing it out to beggars in an orderly fashion, but an overhaul! Throwing out the whole system that makes rich and poor! Restructuring communities all together!

“You always have the poor with you,” Jesus says, and maybe all that’s unsaid is something like this: “because you haven’t been radical enough, you haven’t opened your hands enough, you haven’t restructured the system. You haven’t let your heart and your wisdom lead you into the kind of deep, extravagant actions of hospitality that make real impact.”

Jesus sees past all the assumptions about women, about order, about charity, and sees Mary’s heart. Sees that this is about a most gracious, extravagant act of hospitality. As Mary anoints Jesus’ feet, she is throwing herself, in a deep personal way, into the full heart of Jesus’ movement. Maybe she knows that only this man has the insight and power to upend the system and end poverty, sickness, and death forever. Maybe she senses that this is a special moment, that her time with Jesus is coming to an end, that she must act now to honor him. He didn’t ask to be honored in this way, but he receives it now as a recognition of all that he stands for. Judas wants an efficient project, an easy charity handout, a system that keeps everyone comfortable and in order.

Mary knows that love boils down not to orders and budgets, but to the moments we let the Spirit lead us to wild and indecent acts of grace.

And in that way, she’s *not* out of line with Jesus’ mission at all. She’s *in* line with a God whose abundant grace is not bound by what makes sense. A God who, we learn in our Isaiah reading today, wants to put rivers in the desert and “waste” those resources on the wild animals. A God who “wastes” divine Spirit by spending so much time and attention on human creatures, to the point of becoming one of them and walking among them. A God who proclaims that the way to new life is through the death of the shameful cross.

Yes. Mary is in line with that God, that mission.

And Jesus, it seems, is moved by her display of love. Because a week later, eating Passover with his disciples, he will get up in the middle of dinner and kneel down to wash their feet, in another

surprising act of hospitality and love. And just as he has emulated Mary's act, he will invite the disciples, and all of us who inherit this great story, to emulate his act... How will we respond?

Judas responded by trying to bring order into a chaotic scene. He tried to make sense out of Jesus' mission, distill it into a project that would be easier to contain. And he used this sense of order as a front for his real, selfish goal of pocketing some money. His orderly project of helping the poor degenerated into having the *appearance* of embracing Jesus' mission while actually denigrating Mary and missing the presence of grace in that evening.¹

Like Judas, we are often tempted to put charity and generosity into an orderly program. We might prefer to send a check to a homeless shelter than to welcome a guest into the mess of our home and our lives. We might get uncomfortable when people who use indecent language or have questionable clothing show up at our church event.

On the other hand, there's Mary's way. Mary let the spirit propel her into a risky ask of generosity and love. She didn't know how it would be received, and yet she took the risk to fling her whole self before Jesus. Was it personal gratitude that led her there? Commitment to his vision of wholeness? We don't know. What we do know is that it took listening to that voice of the Spirit inside her that told her to do something wild. Something new.

Will we follow after Mary? Will we let the Spirit break into our order, our practicality? Will we take risks in showing love and hospitality?

I can't tell you what that looks like, exactly, because it has to come from your own deep love and insight. But I wonder: is it something like flying Palestinian youth all the way to Virginia to attend a work camp? Surely that money could be more *sensibly* spent locally for a broad impact, but when we fly our friends from Nablus here in the summer, maybe there is a deep impact on both of us. Or is extravagant hospitality something like rescuing every animal you see and bringing them into your home for your family to deal with? Surely all that time spent cleaning poop could be given to the *order* of an existing shelter-- but then, maybe some of the animals would be missed.

Whatever extravagant hospitality may look like for you, I think it starts, as it did for Mary, with paying attention. She listened to Jesus' words, attended to the workings of her heart, and took a risk. May God—that wildly gracious and boundary-breaking God we worship—help us each to do the same.

¹ P. Mark Acheteimer, "John 11:55-12:11: Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Vol. 2*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 76.