

Devotion is a many-splendored thing. The world offers lots of wonderful things for us to devote our time, money, and attention to: sports franchises, authors, restaurants, movies, bands. And those things let us express our devotion in shamelessly over-the-top ways: painting ourselves in team colors, dressing up as favorite characters as we await the next release in a popular franchise, and, God help us, wearing the *shirt* of the *band* we're going to see. Sometimes, however, more subtle expressions of devotion are backed up by equal zeal for the source. But the one shortcoming that all these things have in common is that they're not for everyone. They're not universal. They do not and cannot include everybody. Believe it or not, some people don't like the Beatles.

Sometimes the exclusivity and obscurity of a cultural offering is part of its appeal. We can revel in the sense of discovery. On a good day we can delight in introducing our friends to wonderful new things; on a bad day we can feel smug and arrogant about our impeccable taste and relative sophistication. But as much as all these things can make us feel connected to other fans, such a connection is usually quite shallow and always constrained, since nothing is for everyone.

Nothing but the Church, that is. The Creeds declare the church is catholic, that is, she stands ready to include, and embrace, absolutely everybody. The Church has something to offer everybody, the grace and life and peace that everybody needs, and also particular gifts that are diverse, rather than uniform. And since the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord, and she is his body, we can see these truths revealed in his person and his interactions with others. Today's Gospel is a prime example. Four people besides Jesus are mentioned by name: Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Judas. Their diversity is instructive, as is the way each of them reveals a facet of Jesus's universal inclusivity.

Let's start with Martha, since she has to get back to work. Jesus made it clear at many points in his ministry how much he loves concrete deeds of service and hospitality. He encouraged his audiences, including us, to serve the poor and needy, and his ministry seemed to flourish especially in moments of table fellowship. It bears mention that in the last sentence of today's Gospel, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, a verse that reads in whole, "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" Rather than setting up a dichotomy between worship and charity, Jesus calls us to do our best at both. I wonder if this insistence on embracing all the different ways to serve God was what Martha found most appealing about Jesus.

On to Mary. The text doesn't make it clear if this Mary, Mary of Bethany, is the same person as Mary Magdalene or not, and perhaps inevitably many Christians have strong feelings about one interpretation or the other. What's important in this scene is the fact that Mary represents the contemplative, mystical, and liturgical side of discipleship. She's also the prototypical fangirl — if they'd had t-shirts in the first century,

she would undoubtedly have worn one of Jesus's to welcome him to their home. True to form, she expresses her immense devotion to Jesus not with words or work but by an action as symbolic as it is extravagant.

In retrospect we see the symbolism of the act, revealing Jesus's kingship, his priesthood, and his imminent death. But think about what it was like in the moment. A little bit of nard goes a long way and the amount Mary used to anoint Jesus would have cost about the same to that family as a new car would cost to us. Imagine Martha and Lazarus smelling the nard, faint, then potent, then overwhelming almost to the point of nausea, then realizing what must have happened, then looking up and being so overcome with astonishment as to be speechless. It was a staggering loss to the household and yet in comparison with the scale of Jesus's divinity, his grace and his power, this act is really no different from all the others any human being can perform in response. The anointing is both far too much and not nearly enough. Jesus's feet in Mary's hands, drenched with fine fragrance, help us to accept the gift of mysticism and to accept that it will never fully dwell within our understanding.

Lazarus has been awfully quiet. But that's justified, considering all he's been through lately. I can only imagine that being undead — pardon me, the politically correct term is “formerly living impaired” — is rather like those mornings when you may have to get out of bed, but God have mercy on anyone who tries to strike up a conversation. He is completely passive and I think that's the point: some of the most powerful revelations of God's glory happen because of what happens to people, not what they do. If you are present for a death, with a family expressing profound love and anguish, you find a new appreciation that life is precious and love is sacred, and God wants us to know that, and God wants us to see God's grace and glory in those moments of unity and awe. You see how completely dependent upon God we are in every moment. So it's OK when God pulls us through and all we have to do is keep still.

Is it such a leap from God glorified in human inaction to God glorified in human malice? Jesus was the Son of God and he was also nobody's fool. Yet not only did he let Judas into the inner circle of disciples, he let him keep the common purse. I know some people try to legitimize Judas, and some of those interpretations are fascinating and illuminating, but I tend to agree with Dante that betrayal is the worst thing one person can do to another and Judas is the epitome of this sin, and therefore all sin. But Judas can't be all bad, since he followed Jesus all the way from Galilee, accepting all the same hardships as the other disciples. And more to the point, Judas is still a person and therefore Jesus loves him.

So we see that Jesus loves us even as we are in sin — not that he doesn't want us to repent, he certainly does — but he means for us to follow him now and achieve spiritual perfection later. Being a sinner does not excuse anyone from doing the work God has set out for us to do. The fact that Jesus is unthreatened by Judas, will even tell him to “do what he needs to do,” reveals Jesus's love in another way: we see that no

amount of evil can pose a threat to God, which is why God's plan for the salvation of the world was a success.

But we'll get to that next week, as we walk the Way of the Cross in Holy Week, together with our fellow Christians from around the world. For now it's quite enough for us to contemplate the radical inclusivity of our God, who loves, and works through, doers, thinkers, be-ers, and even troublemakers. Our God who is so devoted to humanity that he chose to create a Church with a role for everyone. Our God whom we can glorify in a vast multitude of ways, commensurate with the many abundant gifts within each of us, given from the hand of God. Our God who is powerful enough to call deeply flawed people and entrust us with world-changing tasks. Our God who unites all things in heaven and earth in Jesus Christ, who inspires us to lives of ever-deeper devotion.