

Faith and Fair Food

L e c t i o n a r y C o m m e n t a r y

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 25, 2007

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Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalms 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

There are some stories we can no longer hear without also hearing their interpretations. Given that we live in a culture of images, this is especially true when the interpretations are visual, such as a movie that bestows the face of a famous actor upon a character from a book. No matter how many times you go back and re-read the book, if you've seen the movie you will always imagine that character as the actor who played him.

Something like that has happened for me to today's Gospel reading, the story in John 12 of Mary using her hair to wash Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Fortunately or unfortunately, I can never read this story without thinking of Diego Velázquez, the seventeenth-century Spaniard whose painting *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* memorably depicts the dinner in Bethany the night before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem for the Passover. Though probably a graphic conflation of the story in John's gospel and that in Luke 10 of Jesus rebuking Martha for caring more about her housework than listening to Jesus' teachings, Velázquez's painting has always struck me as a commentary on one of the most confounding episodes in the gospels. Just when we thought we had Jesus pinned down as the savior, the miracle-worker, the justice-bearer of the Social Gospel, the one who will make the first last and the last first, we find him welcoming Mary's inexplicable act with the troubling words "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." [*To view the painting* http://www.artchive.com/artchive/V/velazquez/velazquez_martha.jpg.html]

Can he really mean it? Is there really nothing we can do about the injustices of poverty? Must we accept in the same moment the two disastrous truths that Jesus will die and that the poor will always be poor? In John's version, the night before the crowds of Jerusalem greet him as Hosanna, Jesus seems to cut at everything his disciples thought his ministry was about.

In Velázquez's hands, however, this incident of apparent resignation and pessimism becomes an instrument of social critique and a call to action. *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* captures a moment before the action of John's story, before Mary pours the perfume on Jesus' feet. The bulk of the picture is taken up by the figure of Martha, who is still in the kitchen preparing what looks to be a very Spanish dinner: eggs, ground meal, garlic, fish, and a chili pepper. This is in keeping with John's narrative, which tells us that "Martha served" the meal that Jesus and his companions ate. Velázquez's Martha, however, is surprising because she is dressed like a servant and, rather than smiling because Jesus has come over for dinner, is grimacing at the monotony of her labor. Behind her a stern old woman keeps her on task with a jabbing finger and an unsettling scowl. She is a poor worker.

The painting might as well be of any impoverished, unhappy, overworked cook in any Spanish household were it not for the mirror on the wall behind Martha. In the reflected image, which occupies less than a quarter of the canvas, we see a very Spanish-looking Jesus sitting in a chair, his hand cocked in a gesture of instruction. The chair itself is positioned in front of an open doorway whose blackness, perhaps symbolizing the tomb that is only a few days away, seems to swallow him. At his feet sits Mary, her eyes enraptured by her teacher. We know it is Mary because, unlike the three other women in the painting, she wears her hair down in a wild mess with which she will shortly wipe the feet in front of her. Behind her stands an unidentified and apparently skeptical woman. The other men mentioned in the story—Judas and Lazarus—are noticeably absent, having perhaps gone out to buy more provisions for Martha to add to the modest meal. A jar, presumably that containing the perfume, sits on a table nearby.

The painting is striking on its own, but even more so if you know what happens next in the story it tells. The men return. Mary empties the jar and debases herself in front of the disciples. Judas, the treasurer of the group, responds with outrage at the apparent waste. And Jesus utters those infamous words that trouble anyone who takes his teachings on justice seriously: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." It is in the context of this statement that Velázquez's point becomes clear: Martha looms large as the poor woman who would benefit from the sale of the perfume. In the world of the painting, it is she, the cook, who will be affected by what is about to happen to the jar on the table. She represents the ones Jesus tells Judas will always be with them. With Martha in the foreground, however, the poor become not some group of others the disciples have to look out for, but disciples themselves, companions, colleagues, leaders in Christ's church.

Velázquez was just nineteen-years-old when he completed *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* in 1618. He was still living in his hometown of Seville, the port through which all the gold and silver from Spain's empire had to pass on its way to the royal treasury. At the time of the painting's composition, Spain was the richest nation on the planet, and growing richer by the day thanks to the violent conquest and subjugation of the American colonies. The kings of Catholic Spain were also the most famously devout of Europe's monarchs. And yet, the poor were still with them. Amid the

unprecedented influx of wealth, most of which went to fund pointless and bloody wars abroad, deep poverty was an expected and accepted way of life. In a country swept by a religious fervor that manifested itself in enormous, lavish cathedrals and the Inquisition, the church and the government had not only forgotten about the poor but were helping to perpetuate poverty. In his painting Velázquez sought to remind Spain that even, or especially, in an age in which those who control power and money call themselves Christians, the poor and the rich are brothers and sisters in Christ.

So what does Diego Velázquez have to do with the Campaign for Fair Food and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers?

First of all, Velázquez's painting calls us to remember that the poor are with us, not as objects of our charity but as full partners in Christ's church. Indeed, his image takes Jesus' words and rearticulates them as "If you are in my church, you will always be with the poor." That Martha, both in John's gospel and in Velázquez's art, is associated with the preparation and serving of food reminds us that the ways we produce and consume food is deeply implicated in structures of economic injustice.

But I think there's more to it than this. In early March I traveled to Oak Park, Illinois to attend a day-long organizing symposium in preparation for CIW's planned action on April 13th and 14th to convince McDonald's to follow the lead of Taco Bell/Yum! Brands by directly increasing the wages and requiring their suppliers improve the working conditions of farm workers harvesting tomatoes for McDonald's Florida suppliers. At that symposium I heard a phrase that was new to me but which has quickly become my mantra: justice marches on two feet. The first foot is direct service, and the second is systemic change. Both are imperative, and neither alone is sufficient to do the justice God requires of us.

Reading John 12:1-8 in light of this phrase, it strikes me that this story is about the temptation simply to serve when deeper change is needed. "Martha served," John's gospel tells us. But what did Mary do when she poured perfume on her teacher? She prophesied. She protested. She did the radical, unexpected thing, not because she did not care about the poor—after all, she herself was likely among the poor, and it is not Mary but Judas, the one who complains that the perfume was wasted, whom John's gospel identifies as having no genuine regard for the plight of the poor—but because she had heard Jesus' teachings that charity is not enough, that extreme injustice requires extreme action. This is what Jesus himself accomplishes a week later at Easter: a profound upending of the system in which death, greed, and jealousy prevail over life, generosity, and justice. Martha served Jesus, and rightly so, but Mary protested the system that she knew would kill him.

Hearing the CIW story in Oak Park, talking with workers who want nothing more than honest wages and humane conditions in Florida's tomato fields, I had a sense that something new is in the air, that the foot of change is swiftly coming down where the foot

of charity has too long been planted. What a strange place, I thought, to be caught in the stride of justice: in a church parlor in suburban Chicago on a snowy day in early March. And with what strange and beautiful company: pastors, farm workers, parishioners, community organizers, social justice veterans, students, people who speak only Spanish, people who speak only English, people who speak both Spanish and English fluently, twenty-somethings, retirees, one infant, and at least one octogenarian.

John's gospel tells us that Jesus went to the house of Lazarus, the one he had raised from the dead. There, one of his followers served him while another performed a radical, prophetic act of protest. And as Mary anointed the still-living Jesus for the grave from which he would conquer sin, "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." The sweet, potent smell of justice was in the air.

Learn More and Take Action!

Join the CIW and their allies from the faith, student and human rights communities April 13th at McDonald's Headquarters in Oak Brook, IL and April 14th for a Fair Food Parade in downtown Chicago. Learn more about these two days of action as well as the entire "McDonald's Truth Tour 2007: Behind the Golden Arches" at www.ciw-online.org

Learn more about how the CIW was formed by courageous workers from Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti who came together in a church hall to discuss how they might organize to end slavery in the fields. Fourteen years later, CIW is a human rights award winning organization led by and composed of some of the poorest workers in the United States at <http://ciw-online.org/about.html>.