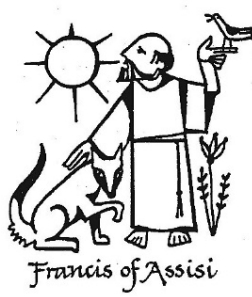


Dear friends in Christ



April 3, 2022, Lent 5

“Costly Ointment”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14;
John 12:1-8

She stumbles through a rubble-strewn street, her look frozen in shock. Gazing upon the wreckage of the multistory apartment building she once knew as home, her mind cannot comprehend the devastation. It's time to leave.

As she grieves for lost neighbors and friends killed in the bombing, tears flow. How can this be happening in her beloved city of Mariupol? Later, her hatred will seethe against the Russians who brought this catastrophe to her homeland.

You know that scene. It's burned into your memory. And, if you're like me, you may also have despairingly mouthed the words of revulsion of President Biden, “For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power.”

This is a scene that has repeatedly been shown on MSNBC as the war's carnage in Ukraine is reported. If lucky, this woman will be one of the fortunate that day who are allowed to travel to Lviv through a so-called “humanitarian” corridor that leads west out of her devastated city to safety – unless Russian troops are again riddling the vehicles streaming out of that city with machine gun fire. Her tears, the precious ointment anointing her

cheeks of anguish -- an ointment of a sadness beyond comprehension. A libation of sorrow precious in the sight of our Lord.

The Gospel of John tells of another most precious ointment poured out. This is the extravagant anointing of Jesus' feet with perfumed oil which comes as a foretelling of his death. As Mary wiped the oil onto his feet with her hair, the entire dwelling was suffused with its perfumed scent.

Leave it to some guy to have no clue as to what is transpiring. Judas, who probably never cared a whit about the poor his entire life, comes unhinged. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" This is the one who is solely focused on spreadsheets, balanced budgets, and hoarding up for himself what he can. This, the man with betrayal in his heart even as he speaks. "Leave her alone," Jesus commands. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

Mary has poured out her best. As that ointment runs over Jesus' feet, the holiness of that moment is sanctified. Her priceless ointment mirrors the costly events yet to come in Jerusalem. Is there such a Balm in Gilead for this sorrow?

There's a saying, "Women hold up half the sky." Looking at the devastation and deprivation the women of Ukraine are facing, it seems like much more than half. I'm sure it felt that way for Mary, and later on for those faithful women who remained at the foot of the cross on Good Friday.

As March is designated as Women's History Month, I have committed myself to reading a couple of women's stories this month. I've already related some of the struggles of Fannie Lou Hamer to achieve voting rights in Mississippi. This, a gift she gave all America.

The other work I've been reading is of the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, her book, ***Lessons from the Edge***.¹ Marie Yovanovitch has endured more than her share of sorrow in the exercise of her patriotic duty to this nation. This, at the hands of the most unscrupulous president in our

¹ Marie Yovanovitch, *Lessons from the Edge: A Memoir* (Boston, MA, Mariner Books

history.

Trump was not content just to fire her from her post in Ukraine but felt the need to trash her reputation as well. She was at the height of her career in the State Department in her third ambassadorship when it all came crashing down.

Marie Yovanovitch was certainly not the first U.S. ambassador to have their reputation called into question, to be discredited. But this was usually by a foreign actor with something to gain or something to hide. But not by their own government.

Trump, complaining to his favorite propaganda outlet, “Fox and Friends”, ranted on about Ambassador Yovanovitch, “She’s very tough. I’ve heard bad things.”²

Trump claimed that she was an “Obama person.” Since her service encompassed several administrations, she could as well have also been a GHW Bush, a Clinton, a GW Bush, and a Trump person. We’re now into multiple personalities.

“And there was a lot of things that she did that I didn’t like, and we’ll talk about that at some point, but I just want to let you know this was not a baby that we’re dealing with...”³ Among the other things Trump didn’t like was her refusal to go along with Rudy Giuliani’s effort to dig up dirt on Hunter Biden while rummaging around through the corrupt sleaze of the Ukrainian mafia.

He complained that she refused to hang his official photo in the embassy. It was in fact prominently displayed...when it did arrive...months later. All, another lie about her being a “Never Trump” person.

Even as she was testifying at Trump’s first impeachment hearing, Trump began trash-tweeting Ambassador Yovanovitch. “Everywhere Marie Yovanovitch went turned bad,” Trump tweeted. “She started off in Somalia, how did that go? Then

² Vinnie Longobardo, “Trump trashes Maria Yovanovitch in sexist rant: They went easy on her because she’s a woman,” Occupy Democrats, November 22, 2019.

³ Ibid.

fast forward to Ukraine.”⁴ In that hearing she stood her ground, “Mr. President, I made things better.”

Later, she would write of Trump’s smear operation in her memoir, “This was something as new as it was threatening. Corrupt actors in Ukraine were colluding with corrupt actors in the U.S. and they were successfully influencing our government and our people...And when Trump waded into the fray by sharing the results of this disinformation campaign with his tens of millions of Twitter followers, he showed how effective the operation had been...but I wasn’t going to go down without a fight.”

Yet, as the slurs and slander, the death threats multiplied, it all took a toll. Her anguish only deepened as one after another of her former State Department colleagues dissented her or remained silent.

Marie’s Yovanovitch’s sorrow was a bitter libation she poured out in defense of this nation and its constitutional rule of laws and decency. This bitter betrayal was utter humiliation as she hovered between “disbelief and despair.”⁵ Yet the service she has offered to her nation is a most “costly ointment.”

As Women’s History Month draws to a close, Ambassador Yovanovitch is to be accounted as one of our nation’s unsung heroes. She has done her duty, and holy is the deed.

Another woman of note and accomplishment has been in the news this week. That is Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman to be so nominated.

Her accomplishments and honors place her as one of the most qualified ever to be nominated for this honor. Yet we had a handful of immature men behaving like adolescent, junior high boys at her hearing.

The silly questions they asked were an embarrassment. A parody of what should have been a dignified process. Ted Cruz pulled out children’s books. I expected his follow-up question to be, “Well, do you like green eggs and ham?” “What about Dick and Jane? -- and wasn’t Spot a gay dog???” Imbecilic questions they asked.

One person posted online a picture of the juxtaposition of Justice Kavanaugh and the nominee with the words, ‘The composure, poise and grace that Ketanji Brown

⁴ Dave Goldiner, “Trump trashes impeachment witness Marie Yovanovitch in real time — and she hits back: ‘I made things better,’” New York Daily News, November 15, 2019.

⁵ Yovanovitch, op. cit., 265.

Jackson has maintained throughout this SOCTUS⁶ hearing, as compared to the hysterical screaming of Kavanaugh during his hearing, is a testament to the strength of talented black women transcending a world defined by mediocre men.”

These antics were even an embarrassment to piggy White men everywhere. Dan Rather sighed, “Given world and national events, it’s difficult if not impossible not to feel anger and despair.”⁷

Several Black women commentators on the *Reid Out* show of Joy Reid noted that as Black women go, there are two essential speeches. One concerns behavior around law enforcement personnel. The second concerns deportment of Black women around racist, obnoxious and clueless White men. “You just want to smack ‘em. But you can’t,” bemoaned Professor Maya Wiley, former counsel to Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City, whom many of us know from her role as an MSNBC legal analyst.

“You just want to smack ‘em, but you can’t.” That’s the bitter pill so many women of color have to quietly swallow. And not just, women of color.

Like Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet, the extravagant love poured out by so many women for families, community and our nation down through the years – the ground it saturates is holy. The service, the tears, the indignities endured and overcome – it all is holy ground.

With these women in mind, my experience of Women’s History Month has been greatly enriched – Fannie Lou Hamer, Marie Yovanovitch, Ketanji Brown Jackson, the women of Ukraine, and Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, who out of an extravagant love, poured out such a costly ointment to anoint our Lord as a foretelling of his death.

For such precious outpouring of these our sisters down through the ages, may our generation be worthy. For their having been amongst us, for their service yet rendered still today, let’s say, “Thanks be to God.”

Amen.

⁶ Supreme Court of the United States

⁷ Dan Rather, tweet of March 26, 2022.