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The ABC's of Faith M - Messiah

John 8:37-41 On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet." Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some asked, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?"

Luke 7:36-39, 44-46 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." ... turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment."

Mark 8:27-30 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

You know what they say about **assuming** things.... For the longest time, I just **assumed** that I wouldn't like sushi. I had the not un-typical Texan's prejudice against

things that weren't cooked, preferably over charcoal. But when we lived in Hawaii, and homemade sushi was often brought to Chat and Coffee and I would sample it because I didn't want to be rude, I discovered that my *assumption* had kept from some of the tastiest things I have ever put in my mouth. On one of my friend Bob's and my southwestern road trips, I had used Google maps to find what I **assumed** was probably a county road traveling due north from near El Paso to near Alamogordo and we took it and ended up with a sometimes harrowing two hour drive over some of the most desolate and uninhabited country I've ever been in and which deposited us somewhere where a sign greeted us with a warning not to get out of our cars because we were in a "Live Fire" area of the army base. The summer Barbara's and my daughter was nine, we just **assumed** that her skinniness was due to a growth spurt - after all we were experts having already raised three children - and were stunned and mortified when we discovered that what we had thought was a growth spurt was actually the onset of Type 1 diabetes.

Assumptions. They can get us in trouble. They can foreclose conversations where we might have learned something if we hadn't *assumed* we already know. They can keep us from realizing that someone is far more complex and interesting than this or that label we have put on them. Peter got in trouble with his assumptions, too, didn't he? Did you listen as the Gospel of Mark told the story of his professing that Jesus was the Messiah? I can almost see Jesus shaking his head as yet again - and not for the last time - Peter gets it completely wrong. Instead of saying "*You are right, Peter, I am the Messiah,*" Jesus adamantly says, in effect, "*Don't say that to anyone!*" and then goes on to talk about his mission and ministry, of how he will in fact suffer and die. And

puzzled Peter then compounds his error by “rebuking” Jesus – Peter didn’t lack for gall, did he, whatever his other faults! – for saying such things and then Jesus gets really angry and compares Peter to Satan. I’m guessing that they didn’t all then sit down and sing Kumbayah together.

What happened here? Why is Jesus so angry and why and how did Peter get it so wrong? Well, it has to do with **assumptions**. You see, Peter very likely *assumed* that the Messiahship of Jesus was going to be one where Jesus would finally reveal himself as a divine warrior king, bringing the armies of heaven down and routing the hated Roman occupiers by force of arms. And, to be fair to Peter, there is a strand – although not the only strand – in the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) that does talk about the Messiah being the return of King David, the one who led the armies of Israel in battle. But clearly that’s not the assumption that he *should* have had or Jesus’ response would not have been so vehement. But this is the point at which we need to ask what *does* this word “Messiah” mean, particularly since it is a word that has indeed entered the “vocabulary of Christian faith” and so is a good candidate for this latest in the “ABC’s of Faith” sermon series. After all, on Easter Sunday we shall once again sing the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s “Messiah”; it is a term that we hear each Christmas when we remember the words of the prophet Isaiah talking about the Messiah who will be born; it’s a term that has entered American slang when we say hear things like this or that CEO was brought in to a trouble company in the hope that she or he might be its “messiah.” But what does the word mean?

Well, it’s literal meaning comes from a Hebrew word meaning “the anointed one.” Throughout the Hebrew Bible, there are stories of folks being “anointed,” usually with

oil. And such anointing was done to prophets, kings, priests, and even to the utensils and furniture in the Temple at Jerusalem. It may seem a strange custom to us, but it is certainly no stranger than some of our cultural conventions. But part of the reason that “anointing” may in fact seem strange to us is that we have lost touch with the meaning behind the practice. But that happens, doesn’t it? None of probably know the original meaning behind putting Christmas lights on our houses or saying “bless you” when someone sneezes or a hundred other examples. But to truly understand the term “Messiah” and to reclaim it for our faith today, it would be good to reclaim the meaning behind such “anointing.” You see, the Hebrew custom of anointing someone or something was to **consecrate** it – a fancy word which simply means that that person or thing was now made sacred. Again, though, that’s a very church word so let’s drill down a little more: to be consecrated, to be made sacred, is to have a purpose that has been blessed by God. *A purpose blessed by God.*

Which means that anything that we would “anoint,” anything that we would take to be a “messiah” needs to indeed be in line with the nature of God – and not at odds with it! And that’s why Jesus was angry with Peter. For you see, Peter’s profession here meant that he assumed that God was one who blessed violence, who saw some people as less than fully human, who would give license for objectifying and dehumanizing some people so that they didn’t count anymore. The Roman Empire was an often evil and oppressive regime, quick to resort to violence and even terror to keep its subjects in line. And whether then or today, there are real and difficult and complex questions that are not easily distilled into a slogan about how we should respond to such examples in modern life. But be that as it may, what Jesus’ rebuke of Peter was

saying, in essence, was this: *“Don’t turn me into one who would use the very same methods as the Romans! Don’t presume that God is like Caesar. My kingdom, my mission, my “messiahship” is not about violence and force and revenge; it is about the power of patient, persistent, suffering love that will win out even in the face of the worst of human evil.”*

So if Peter got it wrong about Jesus and about what his “Messiahship” meant, what’s the alternative? I invite you to consider the story from Luke this morning about the woman who anointed Jesus’s feet with perfume and with her tears. For it is indeed an “anointing,” and what’s more this is the **only** instance of a physical anointing of Jesus during his earthly life to be found in the gospels. Now, Peter *wanted* to anoint Jesus as King, but Jesus would not let him. And those Palm Sunday crowds who lined the Jerusalem streets *wanted* to anoint Jesus as a King, but Jesus would not let them. No, the only example of Jesus allowing someone to anoint him is this woman – whom the text labels “a sinner” – through her tears. What does that suggest? Well, remember, the very notion of anointing means to consecrate someone for a mission that is blessed by a God of unconditional grace and love. And so what this story tells us about Jesus and the kind of King he is is this: the sacred mission of Jesus is to the lost and the lonely; it is a mission that seeks to find the outcast and the hopeless and offer them hope; it is a mission that acknowledges that while folks may have done bad things or made poor choices those things and those choices do not need to trap them forever; it is a mission that refuses to dehumanize, categorize, or reduce to a label any child of God.

In our third scripture this morning from the Gospel of John, there is a line I love;

it's actually a very funny line. Did you hear it? *"Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?"* I can just hear some in the crowd, noses turned in the air, eyes rolling, disdain written on their faces, saying this in the same way that I have sometimes disdainfully said *"Surely, there isn't any real barbecue that comes from North Carolina."* Or as Peter might have said, *"Surely the Messiah is coming as a mighty general and not as a suffering servant."* Or as those at that table where that woman anointed Jesus might have said *"Surely the Messiah has too much class to consort with a woman like her."*

But this returns us to where we began, doesn't it: to **assumptions**. And there are assumptions that we too have to honestly if sometimes painfully question. For you see, sometimes we too want to anoint Jesus to be something other than He is, and to have a mission and purpose other than what it is. Sometimes those "anointings" and those assumptions are small and trivial if no less incorrect: like when we want Jesus to find us a parking place and don't stop to reflect that even if He worked like that (which He doesn't) he probably has better things to do with His time. Other anointings and assumptions, other implied understandings of what we believe to be his mission, are more troubling – as when German soldiers in World War I wore belt buckles engraved with the phrase "Got mit Uns" (God Is With) or when the American soldier screamed at his captured prisoner that, no, God was on the American side. In the 1920s, a man by the name of Bruce Barton looked at the close relationship that Jesus had with his disciples and assumed that who Jesus "really" was was the epitome of a successful businessman, a Savior whose anointing and mission was to teach "sound business principles" and show people how to "close a deal."

But all of these assumptions and anointings indeed make the same sort of mistake Peter made, and, finally, they also affect our understanding of what Jesus calls US to do as we follow Him! For you see, if we serve a Savior whom we **assume** blesses us, or our kind, or our country, or our lifestyle, or our way of doing things more than others then we will find it very, very hard to be about the ministry he called us to of reaching out to those who, like that woman with her perfume and her tears, are shunned and labeled and ostracized and “different.” We will find it hard to care for the homeless and the immigrant and the prisoner without judgmentalism. We will find it much too easy to bless unquestioned arrangements of discrimination against women and those of a different sexual orientation and those of a different ethnicity or who speak another language or who don’t dress “right,” or who like the “wrong” songs, or are the “wrong” age. But when we do so, we diminish Jesus and we diminish what we could have done in His name.

But that’s not the end of the story. For you see on this day and every day, you and I have the choice of what we shall anoint – our own prejudices and fears and tendencies to put of fences and walls, or the Savior who welcomed and set free the hurting, who cares not one whit about someone’s color or gender or orientation or economic status or immigration status, who shows forth a God of grace unbounded and love unconditional and therefore frees us to live well, and beautifully and morally. I know which King, which Messiah, I want to anoint to lead my life. How about you?