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Labor of Love

John 13:34

In his novel *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo describes the moral confusion of Jean Valjean. Valjean is a common laborer who is sentenced to five years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. When his five year sentence becomes nineteen years Valjean's soul withers and hardens. He comes out of prison a hopeless man who cannot find work or a place to live because of his prison record.

One day something happens that changes the course of Valjean's life. He stumbles into the house of an old bishop who offers him hospitality. Valjean is confused by the bishop's generosity. He cannot believe that such kindness can be extended with no strings attached. Because grace has not been part of his bitter experience of life he does not know how to receive it when it is offered. He steals the silver plates from the bishop's cupboard and flees into the night. When he is picked up by the police the next day Valjean is certain that he will go back to prison. But first the police take him to the home of the bishop to confirm the origin of the stolen goods. Valjean is not prepared for the response of the bishop to a man who betrayed his trust. The bishop says, "I'm glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks, too...Why didn't you take them along with your cutlery?" Valjean is astounded. The surprised police have no choice but to release the man they thought was a criminal. After the police depart the bishop places the candlesticks into the hands of Valjean. He offers these words of blessing, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good."

This act of kindness carries a power which even the bishop cannot fully grasp. Valjean's world is dramatically changed. He is transported into a new world of grace which is infused with the presence of God. Valjean has received a glimpse of the vision of John in the 21st chapter of the book of Revelation; "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and God himself will be with them (Revelation 21:1, 3)."

It is this transition which is at the heart of the 13th chapter of John's gospel. There Jesus is speaking to the disciples about his death. It is their last night together. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet and shared with them the eucharistic meal. Both demonstrate the quality of his love. Jesus knows that the disciples will have to come to grips with their grief. But he also wants them to come to grips with the profound way in which their world has been changed by the love they have received from him. His love has ushered them into a new world of grace which is infused by the presence of God. Now he gives to them the responsibility to offer that same gift to others. "I offer you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you... (John 13:34)."

The disciples cannot begin to appreciate the power which Jesus has given to them. They cannot fathom what simple acts of kindness and hospitality can quietly accomplish. These ordinary acts of compassion open us to the transforming presence of God. This is the truth that is at the center of an event that took place just before Jesus and the disciples entered Jerusalem. John's gospel describes a dinner at the home of Lazarus in Bethany. While Lazarus' sister Martha is serving the food, his sister Mary places perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. It is an act of hospitality, friendship,

and gratitude. Mary is looking for a way to respond to the love that Jesus has extended to her family. She washes Jesus' feet because she has to do something. It is a labor of love.

The disciples immediately react negatively to Mary's gesture. It is too costly. It isn't in the budget. It doesn't help the poor. But Jesus responds in a very different way. The love which motivates that gift touches him very deeply. He knows his journey is coming to an end. This simple gesture of kindness reminds him that he goes to his death surrounded by a loving family. Their love is a sign of the love of God. It is a gift which transports him into the presence of God. Mary's act of love accomplishes so much more than she could ever imagine. Without knowing it she has anointed Jesus for his death.

During the last week of my mother's life we knew that her time was running out, but we did not realize how quickly she was slipping away. She didn't have any daughters, but she did have a special relationship with several of her nieces. She had been for them an anchor of support through difficult times in their lives. Two of these nieces made a snap decision to make the long trip from Kansas to see her when they learned that the time might be short. As it turned out they were able to spend an entire day with her just two days before her death.

I marveled as I watched my cousins doing what I would never have thought to do for my mother. They cleaned her bedroom. They changed the sheets on her bed. They bathed her. They combed her hair. They gave her a manicure. They wheeled her outside to enjoy a beautiful day on the patio at Presbyterian Home. They needed to do something to physically express their love. It was truly a labor of love. Then I realized that what they were doing was the same thing they had seen her do in similar circumstances. I remembered how creative my mother was in offering small gestures of compassion. They were responding in the way that she had taught them over the years. She taught them without realizing what she was doing.

The most revealing moment for me came as I watched my cousins give her a manicure. My mother was sitting in her recliner and mostly sleeping. She was worn out from all the personal attention. But she was awake just enough to extend her hands out to the bowl and ease her fingers into the warm soapy water. Her eyes were shut and she did not see the tears rolling down the cheeks of her nieces as they worked on her hands. But there was on her face an expression of complete contentment, like a baby sleeping in the arms of her mother. She was surrounded by her family receiving from them the love she had so freely given.

Suddenly I realized what I was witnessing. My cousins were teaching me something about John's gospel that I had never noticed before. My mother was being anointed for her death. She was resting in the presence of God. She was ready for a new heaven and a new earth.