Today, March 8, 1991, we are celebrating International Women’s Day and Women’s History Month, both of which occur during the pre-Easter season of the church year known as Lent. In both Western and Eastern church traditions Lent is a several week period of sober preparation for Easter—in the past, and in some churches even now, a period during which candidates prepared for baptism. Lent is also associated with penitential fasting, as Christians recall that they, along with the rest of humankind, are the sinners because of whom and for whom Christ died. It is a time during which we remind ourselves, as Jesus reminded the devil during his own wilderness fast, that we do not “live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4 NRSV).

Because International Women’s Day has its roots in the largely-secular history of organized labor and the international socialist movement, we might well conclude that its celebration in the middle of Lent is the result of accident rather than design. And yet I discovered during my research for this talk that the motto of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (one of the more militant of the early labor unions) is the phrase “Not By Bread Alone”—the same words with which Moses sent the Israelites into the promised land (Deut. 8:3) and by which Jesus rebuked the devil when tempted to break his forty-day fast by changing stones into bread (Matt.4:1-4).

Certainly we are embodied selves, as needful of food, sleep and shelter as the rest of God’s creatures. But if we have only these we will never become what God intended us to be. As sinful people we need God’s grace—that is what penitential Lenten fasting (symbolic or actual) recalls for us. But just as important, we are creatures made in God’s image: created—men and women alike—to be sociable, to exercise responsible dominion over the earth, to express creativity, to enjoy beauty. Although bread is a necessary condition for our survival, it is not a sufficient one. We need roses too.

The founders of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union may indeed have shortened Jesus’ words in their motto with the idea of subtracting God from their world view. But this much they understood from their own Judeo-Christian roots: human beings, regardless of their religion or ideology, become dehumanized if they are made to live by bread alone. That is why women textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on strike in 1912 against a 56 hour work week and a 16-cents-an-hour wage, carried banners reading: “We Want Bread—And Roses Too.”

Matthew 26:6-16 (the text with which we introduced this meditation) is a passage about bread and roses, and I will return to this theme shortly. But it is also a tribute to a woman who understood and symbolized Jesus’ destiny so perceptively that Jesus said, in the words of Matthew’s account, “Wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she had done will be told in remembrance of her.” Occurring in slightly different forms in all four gospels (cf. Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8) it is the account of a woman—nameless in the three synoptic gospels, but identified as Mary of Bethany in John’s account—who anoints Jesus with expensive perfumed oil. In Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts, she pours this oil over Jesus’ head; in Luke’s and John’s account, she pours it over his feet. But either way, it seems that she is a step ahead of Jesus’ male disciples in understanding just what kind of Messiah Jesus really is.
It was lordly kings and awe-inspiring priests whose heads were anointed in Israelite tradition; yet both Matthew and Mark record Jesus as saying that this woman, in anointing his head, was in fact preparing his body for an ignominious death. On some level this woman seemed to realize, as the disciples still did not, that Jesus must be a suffering Messiah. It was lowly servants who washed other peoples’ feet in Israelite society, as Peter no doubt knew when he protested Jesus’ foot-washing activity in John 13. Yet only a few days beforehand, according to John, a woman had done for Jesus what Jesus did for his disciples the evening of his betrayal, when he washed their feet and told them to do the same for each other. With this gesture he affirmed that he would be a servant-king before he would be a conquering king. So it is perhaps not accidental that in Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts Judas leaves to betray Jesus right after the woman has anointed his head, while in John’s account he leaves after Jesus, like the woman, takes the role of a servant in washing his disciples’ feet. Understanding finally that Jesus is not the kind of messiah he wanted is more than Judas can take. Feeling betrayed by a woman-mediated announcement of Jesus’ suffering servanthood, Judas prepares to sell his Lord for thirty pieces of silver.

Now of course, what the woman in Bethany did for Jesus by anointing his head has not, in fact, been “told in remembrance of her... wherever the good news is preached.” When the Lenten act of the gospel story is told we almost invariably hear about the all-male gathering at the last supper. Granted, the last supper represents the beginning of an important institution in the life of the church, one about which Jesus said “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). But it is strange, given the striking parallelism of Jesus’ words in the two situations (“This will be told in remembrance of her...” or “Do this in remembrance of me...”) that Christians have not told this woman’s story with even a fraction of the same fidelity they have given to repeating the account of the Last Supper. Yet God, it seems, did not forget the precarious understanding of this woman, for it was another woman (or women, depending on which gospel one reads) who first recognized the resurrected Lord and told his male disciples about it. In two of the four gospels the disciples are described as not believing this report—this “idle tale” in Luke’s words (24:11). But male condescension has rarely succeeded in silencing female witness to Christ’s resurrection, because few women can remain silent about the affirmation which Jesus gives them. In Dorothy Sayers’ memorable words: Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there has never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them as “The women, God help us!” or “The ladies, God bless them!”, who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious...Nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about women’s nature.

But I said earlier that these texts are also about bread and roses. And this is because the generosity of the woman’s gift reflects the generosity of God. The short-sighted disciples seem to believe that we must choose between bread and roses: the woman’s precious ointment, they argue, should not be wasted on someone’s head—not even Jesus’ head. It should be sold to help the poor, who need bread, not the perfume of roses. But Jesus reception of the woman’s extravagant gifts remind us that the same God who sees the sparrow fall is also the one who clothes and perfumes the lilies—the same God who knows that we need bread and roses to live as full human beings, as well as the Bread of Life to live eternally. The women textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts knew that the 1912 strike issue was not just about bread, but about human dignity and the human thirst for beauty. That is why they carried banners reading: “We Want Bread—And Roses Too.” Inspired by their proclamation, a man named James Oppenheim wrote a poem in memory of the 1912 strike, and it is with his poem that we close our International Women’s Day chapel. It is hardly sophisticated verse, as you will note, but it captures the essential theme of this meditation:

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: Bread and roses, bread and roses!

As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women’s children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be marked from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies: give us bread but give us roses!

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go calling through our singing their ancient cry for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drooping spirits knew;
Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses too!

As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days:
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge, or idler—ten that toll where one reposes,
But a sharing of life’s glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses!

Closing prayer:
We come to you, Lord, in this Lenten season acknowledging that your faithfulness to women has been great—not just in your dying, but in your affirmation of our living, in your receipt of our service, and in your recognition of our need for bread—and roses too. May we leave this place today with the balm of reconciliation in our hearts, prepared to live as well as confess, with the apostle Paul, that “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female—for we are all one in Christ Jesus, “ in whose name we pray, AMEN.